

GRAND
STRATEGY

VOLUME I
Rearmament Policy

by
N. H. GIBBS

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Cabinet Office, Historical Section,
16th November 1972.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The present volume on the Rearmament Policy of the British Government between the wars was planned as an introduction to the series on Grand Strategy in the official United Kingdom military histories of the war of 1939-45. The other volumes of the series have all now been published, and the Editor regrets the delay in the appearance of Volume I.

The delay has, however, made it possible, owing to a relaxation of official policy, to assign to individuals by name the views expressed by them in Cabinet and other secret discussions and also to give specific references to sources which in all but the last of the previous volumes were confined to confidential editions.

The Editor would like to take this opportunity to offer his thanks to all those distinguished officers who have successively been members of his Advisory Panel during the preparation of this volume—most recently Admiral Sir Charles Daniel, the late General Sir William Stirling, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Ralph Cochrane along with Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Jacob who has served continuously on the Panel from its earliest days; also to Mr. Clifton Child and his predecessors and the staff of the Cabinet Office Historical Section for their invaluable help.

I should like also to record the debt of gratitude owed by the historians to Lord Trend, who as head of the Cabinet Office has presided over the production of the military histories, for the unfailing interest and support which they have received from him.

J.R.M.B.

PREFACE

This volume differs in some ways from the other volumes in the Grand Strategy series to which it provides an introduction. In the first place, it is concerned solely with the years of peace and contains no account of any military operations. This has two consequences. Planning lacked that point of reference which actual and immediately prospective military operations provide. Further, although pre-war plans forecast fairly accurately the early months of the war in North Western Europe and some subsequent operations in North Africa, they were totally unrelated to such major developments as the German conquest of the whole of Western Europe and most of Western Russia, and to Japan's advance across South-east Asia and wide areas of the Pacific. Further, and as one would expect in a period of purely peace-time planning, the significance of political calculation was greater than was the case after war began. Of course, such a comparison is only relatively true. The 'phoney war' period of the winter of 1939-40 was marked by a slow transition to wartime conditions, and the first part of Volume II in the series has much in common, in this respect, with the present volume. Something of the same kind is true in the final volume when it deals with the political problems of approaching peace. Indeed, all the volumes are concerned, at times, with events in which political calculation was, even if only temporarily, of greater importance than military action. Nonetheless, the difference suggested is a valid one.

In the second place, the story told in this volume covers, mainly, a period of six years and, though to a lesser degree, the whole of the inter-war period. The events recounted cannot, therefore, be dealt with on the scale which is possible for the years of the war. Treatment is necessarily more selective. My awareness of this limitation is made all the more acute by the publication of a growing number of specialised works on particular aspects of the history of the period and by the detailed research of some of my own graduate students in recent years. It is, however, important for the student of the period to be able to identify the main course of central policy-making and action; and this the present volume seeks to do. There is an advantage in providing an outline of the evolution of that policy which is not burdened with discussion of the day-to-day reactions to events within individual Departments.

British grand strategy is therefore described from the point of view of the Cabinet and of those major committees which were responsible for providing Ministers, collectively, with military information and advice. Departmental views and policies are seen, for the most part, only in an extra-Departmental setting and at a point when Departmental policy had already been decided upon. What went on behind the scenes inside Departments is not described here; that is not a part of the story which normally appears in the records of the Cabinet or, indeed, of its major committees. It is not difficult, for example, to follow the Ministerial debate of the winter of 1937-38 which ended in a decision to restrict the Army to a 'limited liability' or general purposes role. What is not clear, even from the accompanying memoranda of the Secretary of State for War, is what debate went on inside the War Office and whether Cabinet policy did or did not meet with much criticism there. Again, the operation of Treasury control on decisions inside the Cabinet can be traced fairly easily. But what then went on inside Departments, and after global sums for the three Services had been agreed upon, does not emerge in any detail from the Cabinet records. It would be dangerous to assume that, once a Cabinet decision was made, Departments were then able to

spend whatever had been allocated to them free from further Treasury participation in translating decisions into action. The Departmental story is one which can and, no doubt, will be told. But the records of Departments could lead the historian into recording discussions and recommendations which, as often as not, might eventually be ignored in final decisions at Cabinet level. A composite story of Treasury control based on Departmental papers needs in any case to be preceded by a series of detailed studies well beyond the scope of this volume.

Now that most official records remain classified for a period of only thirty years it is possible to alter some of the practices followed in the first editions of all but one of the other volumes in the series. Full references are given to the records used, and the personal views of Ministers, and in many cases of officials, are made clear. References are given both in the titles and numbers of the original Cabinet and Committee series, together with a cross reference table to the Public Record Office code. This has been done partly because the original titles and numbers sometimes indicate more fully the nature of the sources used and could thus be of greater help to other students.

While there are still differences of view about the way in which the war was fought, differences are probably even greater about the events which preceded the outbreak of war. In this volume I have tried to put forward three, for me, basic views about those events, none of them new, but which I have attempted to spell out in some detail. First, that appeasement was the product of a national attitude towards domestic and international events. It is a distortion of the truth to blame the policies of appeasement upon the supposed laziness of one Prime Minister and the supposed dictatorial obstinacy of another. The official records certainly suggest that Mr. Baldwin was less influential in defence affairs than his most recent biographies suggest and that partly because of that, Mr. Chamberlain impressed his own views on defence policy sooner than might have been expected even from a Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is, moreover, true that both men were typical of their times in these matters and saw no need to think or act differently. Nonetheless neither Mr. Baldwin nor Mr. Chamberlain duped or bullied the Cabinet, Parliament or the nation as a whole into adopting policies to which there was strong and consistent opposition. Both men swam with a very strong tide. Whether they should or could have done otherwise is a different matter.*

Second, the appeasement policies of the Baldwin and Chamberlain administrations were substantially supported by the Chiefs of Staff. There were differences on matters of detail and sometimes on broader issues of policy and there were occasions when it looked as though the military advice offered to Ministers promised something radically different. But in the end, and certainly during the critical period of Mr. Chamberlain's administration, the views on grand strategy of Ministers and Chiefs of Staff were very similar.

Third, the grand strategy which evolved from these circumstances, at any rate until the last few months before war began, was essentially one of isolation from rather than commitment to continental Europe. Put in that way it may seem as though I am looking at the history of the nineteen-thirties through the eyes of a generation later. That is to some extent unavoidable. But it still remains true that Britain's strategic problems have been posed in this way for a very long time; and what may sometimes appear as no more than differences of view about methods

* Since this volume is concerned with official policy and military strategy it does not touch more than very occasionally, and then only briefly, on those wider issues of the 'interplay between British character and British circumstance' which are dealt with in detail by Correlli Barnett in his most recent work, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972).

has been in fact, as I believe it was in the nineteen-thirties, representative of a far deeper division.^(†)

Too many people have helped me in the preparation of this volume for me to be able to thank all of them. But there are some to whom I owe a special debt. Of those who were active participants in the events of the period the last late Lord Chatfield, the late Lord Swinton, and Lord Avon gave generously of their time in reading drafts and commenting on them. The late Lord Bridges helped both by originally making it possible for me to see the papers of Neville Chamberlain while they were still in private hands, and also by reminiscing at leisure on the events of the last year or two before the war, on more than one occasion while walking round Christ Church meadow after college meetings.

Next, it is a pleasure to acknowledge my debt to the late Mrs. Neville Chamberlain, and to the late Miss Hilda Chamberlain for allowing me to work on the private papers in their possession and also for their generous hospitality. Visits to Miss Chamberlain's home at Odiham, a home Neville Chamberlain knew well, gave me the opportunity to read his long letters to his two sisters and also his diary, the latter a document which, unfortunately does not record the events of the whole of his three years as Prime Minister. At her home in London Mrs. Chamberlain made available to me many of the letters to her husband dealing with his public life, including those which he received in the immediate aftermath of Munich; and her thoughtful hospitality made it possible for me to meet and talk with some of Mr. Chamberlain's contemporaries whom otherwise I would have been reluctant to impose upon.

Finally, within the Cabinet Office I have received constant help, again from so many that they cannot all be named. In common with the other contributors to the series, I owe much to the Editor, the late Sir James Butler and to the members of the Advisory Panel. The late Mr. Brian Melland, formerly head of the Enemy Documents Section, gave freely of his time as did more than one member of his staff. Three others, at different periods, gave me help the value of which I cannot over-estimate—Miss Eve Streatfeild, Mrs. Jean Hamilton and Mr. W. Todhunter. To the last named I owe an especial debt not only for his meticulous care in helping to prepare the volume for and through the press, but also for frank, although always courteous criticism. It hardly needs emphasising that, even when all these acknowledgments are made, I am alone responsible for any views expressed in the book.

[†] For a recent analysis of British strategic thought and tradition in the twentieth century see Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment. The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars*. (Temple Smith, London, 1972).

Introduction

THIS VOLUME is designed to provide a background to the later volumes in the Grand Strategy series which deal with the conduct of operations once the Second World War began. Its main emphasis is on the years from 1933 to 1939. In November 1933, Mr. MacDonald's National Government set up a high-level Committee to enquire into the state of Britain's armed forces and their adequacy for the broad strategic purposes for which they were designed. This was essentially an enquiry into deficiencies. In other words, its purpose was to make recommendations which would, if accepted, render possible the completion of plans for all three Services originally drawn up during the nineteen-twenties and still, in 1933, incomplete partly because of the impact of the Ten Year Rule, partly because of foreign policy assumptions which had made the Rule acceptable, and partly because of the inevitable financial stringency of the post war period intensified by the Great Depression.

From the beginning the deficiency approach proved inadequate. This was largely because the still incomplete Service programmes, and the grand strategy to which they were related, were products of the hopeful period of the nineteen-twenties during which they originated. The first attempt seriously to complete these programmes was now being made, ten years later, because of an already changing international scene, and that change itself made the original programmes, even if completed, out of date from the start. This soon became evident from an examination of the still deficient 52 squadron scheme for the Royal Air Force, and from a consideration of the relevance of the One-Power naval standard, accepted in the Washington Treaty of 1922, to the very different circumstances of the early nineteen-thirties. It should have been obvious that an adequate grand strategy for national and imperial defence could not be planned on the basis of already outdated programmes, but this Ministers unfortunately found it difficult to admit, since all the basic conditions for adequate programmes were repugnant to them. Nor until late July 1935 was that admission made. Only then were the Cabinet's professional advisers instructed to abandon the deficiency approach and to recommend 'programmes on the assumption that by the end of the financial year 1938-39 each Service should have advanced its state of readiness to the widest necessary extent in relation to the military needs of national defence and within the limits of practicability'. The resulting recommendations were submitted to Ministers in November 1935, and formally embodied in policy decisions in the early spring of 1936. The process of rearmament expressly designed for the steadily deteriorating international scene of the nineteen-thirties had at last begun and, with it, the development of detailed plans for the use of the country's resources and the deployment of its armed Services if a second world war should unhappily break out.

Part II of this volume deals with the deficiency programmes of 1934-35 and with the investigations for, and the terms of, that third report of the Defence Requirements Committee in the winter of 1935-36 which marks the transition from completing old programmes to the development of new ones. It was a transition, not a sudden break, despite the fact that it happened to coincide with what many have argued to be the real dividing line in the international events of these years, Germany's military reoccupation of the Rhineland zone. Part III is concerned with the details of the rearmament programmes of the three Services, with the financial and production limits within which they were carried out, and with the

strategic plans which, within those limits, determined the pattern of rearmament. Part IV tells the story of how, during the last year before war broke out, these plans were fitted into and also changed by broader plans for an allied, mainly Anglo-French strategy for war against a combination of Germany, Italy and Japan.

None of these events, however, neither the deficiency nor the rearmament plans, nor the plans for a joint strategy can be fully understood unless seen against the background of events in the previous decade. Views on national and imperial defence in Britain did not change suddenly when Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933, any more than they had done so when the Japanese army invaded Manchuria in September 1931. What most British people thought of war and of Britain's possible part in a major war in the early nineteen-thirties was roughly what they had thought as far back as Locarno and even earlier. And what the country could offer as its contribution to the waging of a major war in 1933 and the immediately succeeding years, arising either as a result of obligations under the Covenant of the League of Nations or otherwise, was a product of agreements and decisions, both domestic and international, made during the previous decade.

This study, therefore, begins with a brief survey of British defence policy between 1919 and 1933. It is necessarily selective, dealing only with major decisions recorded in international agreements or in internal official policy statements, how and why they were made, and how and why they—or at any rate some of them—were called in question as the world moved into and out of the Great Depression in the early nineteen-thirties.

The international prospect in 1919–20 seemed hopeful. Germany had been defeated and, as a consequence, her attempt at the domination of Europe—if that is what she really had looked for in 1914. It seemed reasonable for governments, following the undeniable wishes of their people, to turn their backs on fighting and to concentrate on domestic matters and the pursuit of peace.

But appearances were deceptive. Germany had been defeated and had forfeited territory in the west and in the east, in Alsace Lorraine and in the Polish corridor. But she remained potentially the most powerful nation in Europe. Indeed, she had been left potentially more powerful than she had been in 1914. To the east, Russia had been not only defeated in war but had suffered the further, if only temporary, weakening effects of revolution. To the west, France had spent her strength in war every bit as much as Germany, with less potential for recovery. Britain had suffered less than France or Germany but emerged from a great war, for the first time, relatively weaker than she had entered it. Finally, and whatever the harshness of the terms imposed upon her at Versailles, Germany had in principle been treated as an equal of the victor nations. What all this amounted to was the prospect, at any rate in the long term, of an imbalance of power in Europe, a condition which while certainly not bound to lead to war could well do so even without the growth of Fascist movements and dictatorships. With them the likelihood would be much increased.⁽¹⁾

French governments in the nineteen-twenties were not unaware of this danger and tried to build into the peace terms some provisions for, as far as possible, the long term control of the danger of German resurgence. But their most radical proposals were blocked by Britain and America. Thereafter, French fear of a reviving Germany showed itself, if not continuously then certainly at intervals down to and including the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932–34 and the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1935.

With Britain it was different. The violent anti-German emotions of the latter part of the war evaporated quickly and, with them, fear of Germany as a possible future threat to Britain's own security. Once the Treaty of Versailles was signed every British government in the nineteen-twenties showed itself anxious to bring

Germany back into the European family of nations, not merely in theory but also in practice, on equal terms; and that, every bit as much as an assurance to the French in their search for security, was the explanation of the attitude of Britain towards Locarno. With the attitude there went a readiness to accept revision of the Treaty terms which showed itself quite clearly at the Disarmament Conference and persisted down to the summer of 1938. Of course there was growing apprehension from the advent of Hitler to power onwards. But the change did not show itself immediately and older attitudes died slowly; it took the British a long time to be convinced that Hitler planned not merely to revise the peace terms but to go further.

While these matters are relevant to an attempt to analyse the general causes of the Second World War, what is important here is their relevance to British defence policy between the wars and to planning for the war which began in September 1939. British attitudes towards Germany as they have just been described sprang just as much from instinctive aversion from the events of 1914-18 as from any love or respect for Germany and her people or even from a detached assessment of the wisest policies to follow in Britain's own interest. The First World War was, in fact, a major step in bringing Britain into that closer association with continental Europe which is still being debated in the early 1970's. But in 1920 the war was either not seen in that perspective or, if it was so seen, the perspective was denied because of the nature of the war itself. It is essential to an understanding of the story told in this volume to realise that the war of 1914-18 was regarded as justifiable in Britain only if it could genuinely be regarded as a war to end war. Such bloodshed and misery could not be accepted again. Therefore there was no need to reason how they had come about and whether or not they might recur. Peace had returned, and the ways and causes of war were put aside; and, as part of the process, the British became more inward-looking, more concerned with themselves and less with the ways in which their fortunes and their security were, unavoidably, linked with those of other nations. War had involved commitment and war had been horrible. Therefore the commitment itself had been wrong.

In all this most Ministers and the public at large were of one mind. As a result, when the danger of war loomed up again, some simply turned their backs on it while others tried to thrust aside a spectre they hated to contemplate by half-hearted measures which, they hardly dared admit, might fail. Policy became an inconclusive mixture of careful analysis and reluctance to accept its hardest implications; of facing forward to the increasing danger of war and looking back over the shoulder at what hope of peace could still not relinquish. There was steadiness of purpose of a kind—loathing of the ways in which nations had fought each other on the bloody fields of northern France and Belgium in 1914-18. But the loathing, however understandable, too often obscured the broad strategic reasons why Britain had fought in the First World War at all thus, in turn, obscuring why and how she might have to fight again. It is arguable that indecision did not finally disappear until the evacuation from Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. For the purposes of this volume it disappeared, at any rate to a considerable extent, in the spring of 1939, when Mr. Chamberlain's Government at last decided openly to face not merely war but the kind of war it least wanted Britain to fight, and at last entered into detailed and comprehensive discussions with the French Government on how best to fight it.

SOURCE

Page

(1) See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London 1961) and F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge 1963). xxiv

PART I

CHAPTER I

NAVAL DISARMAMENT 1919-30

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THE DISARMAMENT YEARS

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OF ALL the features of Britain's disarmament in the years after the First World War the disarmament of the Royal Navy is the most striking. In quantitative terms, perhaps, the Army suffered even more; in terms of imagination and far-sightedness the Royal Air Force was perhaps worst hit. But the Royal Navy which at the end of the war was by far the largest navy in the world,⁽¹⁾ which had for so long claimed and exercised supremacy on the high seas, found itself within the space of three years relinquishing the title to both distinctions. Before, however, that fundamental change in national strategy became apparent, and as part cause of it, Lloyd George's Coalition Government formulated an overall rule for defence planning in the next decade which largely determined the course not only of naval but of all other forms of disarmament.

1. *The Origin of the Ten Year Rule, 1919*

On 15th August 1919, the War Cabinet set out the principles which, it said, should govern the plans of the Service Departments during the coming years. Some of these applied to the work of the individual Services. But one general principle was to apply to them all. 'It should be assumed for framing revised Estimates, that the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years, and that no Expeditionary Force is required for this purpose'.⁽²⁾ In one form or another this Ten Year Rule was to be the guiding principle of Britain's defence policy until 1932. And, even when it was rescinded in that year, it left behind it a legacy of uncertainty and unpreparedness which was hardly dissipated when the Second World War began.

Considering its long-term importance, the actual formulation of the Ten Year Rule and the process by which a decision on it was reached, appear to some degree casual. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise. The international outlook was not yet provided with even a formal framework of reference within which to forecast future events. The Treaty of Versailles had not yet been ratified; the other peace treaties were not even completed; and the grouping of

nations after the chaos of war had hardly reached the stage of discussion.⁽³⁾ As we shall see shortly, Ministers were already considering the prospects of disarmament, particularly naval disarmament and the international setting in which it might take place; but, on the other hand, there was as yet no attempt to relate the principles of defence planning to possible obligations under the Covenant of the League of Nations.

It would appear that the motives behind this important decision, and perhaps naturally in the immediate post-war period, were very largely financial ones. Throughout the spring and early summer months of 1919 there were discussions between Ministers about future national defence policy and, more particularly, about plans for the Royal Navy. Everything turned on the related questions of the paramount need for economy in defence spending and the extent to which such economy could be justified by the outlook in foreign affairs. In more than one memorandum of this period the Board of Admiralty stressed how difficult it was, '... in the present unsettled state of international affairs to arrive at any final conclusion as to the Naval strength which will be required in the future'⁽⁴⁾ and their clear understanding that whatever they asked for was '... providing for a purely transitional period.'⁽⁵⁾ Nonetheless, the Admiralty were presenting estimates for over £170 million.⁽⁶⁾ Commenting on these estimates, and comparing them in terms both of costs and manning levels with those immediately before the war, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Austen Chamberlain, expressed his 'profound shock' that the Admiralty should contemplate such expenditure in a post-war world in which old enemies lay defeated and in which the other two remaining great naval powers, America and Japan, both were, and must for some time remain, inferior in strength to the United Kingdom.⁽⁷⁾

Only a few days later these views were repeated by the Secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Maurice Hankey. In a memorandum written for the Prime Minister, Hankey not only emphasised many of the foreign policy arguments advanced by the Chancellor, in particular those which advised against naval rivalry with the United States, but also expressed his view that 'non-productive employment of man-power and expenditure, such as is involved by naval, military and air effort, must be reduced within the narrowest limits consistent with national safety.' He added that, in his view, the Committee of Imperial Defence* should provide the three Services with a broad policy for framing estimates and that such a policy should start from 'the necessity of preparing a minimum basis in view of the need of economy.'⁽⁸⁾

* From now on referred to as the C.I.D. For a brief account of the structure and working of the Committee of Imperial Defence, see below, Chapter XX.

It does not seem that the C.I.D. was instructed as Hankey wished. Nonetheless, almost simultaneously with his own memorandum the Treasury, at the request of the Prime Minister, circulated a memorandum which drew attention to the deficit of £250 million announced in the previous Budget debate, and also to a further expected deficit of £200 million to which Service expenditure, over and above current Estimates, had substantially contributed. Seeking a way out of the country's financial problems, the memorandum argued that it would be impossible to appeal effectively for private thrift, for essential saving for investment, unless the Government gave a 'notable (even, perhaps an exaggerated) example'; and from that it went on to claim that no substantial reduction in Government expenditure could, in fact, be made 'except on the expenditure of the Army, Navy, and Air Force'. The Treasury then asked for a cut in Service allotments from the total of £502 million for 1919-20 to a little more than one-fifth of that figure for the succeeding year.⁽⁹⁾

These matters were again discussed at length at a Cabinet meeting on 5th August. Surveying a whole range of problems,—domestic, Irish and foreign—the Prime Minister specifically emphasised the seriousness of Britain's financial difficulties. He argued that, in present circumstances, the Government could take some risks in defence but none in social and economic affairs. Reduced public expenditure and a high level of employment were prime necessities if the country was to avoid labour troubles. Nor did the Cabinet as a whole dissent from the Prime Minister's view. However, when the First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long, complained that it was difficult for his Department to plan economies, and unfair for others to criticise its extravagance 'until it *was known* what specific duties the Navy of the future would have to perform', the Prime Minister admitted that there ought to be some policy guidance covering perhaps the next five or ten years. Mr. Churchill then suggested, and the Cabinet approved, that the Service Departments and the India Office should prepare memoranda so that the Cabinet as a whole could formulate a comprehensive view on defence responsibilities for the kind of period originally proposed by the Prime Minister.⁽¹⁰⁾

An Admiralty paper on Post War Naval Policy was ready by 12th August and was circulated to the Cabinet the next day. Amongst the questions posed was one asking the length of 'time during which we may reckon on immunity from war with a great Power or combination of small powers giving an equivalent enemy force, and therefore a reduction in our naval preponderance.' Admitting that if the period under consideration could be ten rather than five years the saving would be much greater, the Admiralty paper nonetheless argued that the shorter period was the safer basis for planning since

no one yet knew how successful the League would be, and since knowledge of American and Japanese plans covered only the next five years. Having asked for the Admiralty's views the Cabinet then completely ignored them when it met on 15th August. The Ten Year Rule was formulated as a basis for planning, but the detailed naval paper was not even considered. On the basis of the Rule the Admiralty was directed to undertake no new construction and to aim at estimates limited to £60 million.⁽¹¹⁾ Moreover, so strong was the preoccupation with economy, linked with the assumption that useful economy could be achieved only in the area of national defence, that the Government decided it would be unwise to announce its decision on the unlikelihood of major war in the next ten years lest it be assumed that such a war, at the end of that period, was in fact to be expected.

Comment has already been made on the fact that a decision with such long-term results for national and imperial defence was reached before even the formal pattern of the future international scene had been set down. It should not, therefore, be surprising that there was virtually no discussion at this stage of the possible effects of the Ten Year Rule either on the armed forces or on industry. The Admiralty, it is true, warned the Cabinet that a stop in naval construction and repair work could result in labour troubles if men discharged from naval work remained unemployed.⁽¹²⁾ But such problems as the loss of skilled labour and of specialised production facilities, quite apart from more speculative matters such as the effect on public and Service morale, do not seem to have been mentioned at this stage.

2. *The Problem of Naval Defence: The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1919-June 1921*

It would not be profitable at this juncture to try to assess the immediate impact of the Ten Year Rule upon the detailed programmes of the Army and the Air Force. There were bound to be substantial cuts, in any case, at the end of a long and costly war, whether made on the basis of any principle or none. Later on the connection between those programmes and the Rule became more important and more obvious and will be discussed in the appropriate context.

But the case of the Navy is different. Even without warning from the Admiralty, Ministers were aware that the imposition of the Rule would almost certainly mean that Britain must relinquish her traditional supremacy at sea and perhaps even find herself in a position of naval inferiority to the United States of America; it is not, therefore, surprising that the suggestion was made 'that the U.S.

Government might be approached with a view to an arrangement for a reduction of the number of ships maintained in commission'.⁽¹³⁾

At this point Viscount Grey of Falloden, formerly Foreign Secretary, was invited to become the new Ambassador to Washington. Grey declined the invitation, but made it known that he would undertake a special mission—pending the appointment of a new Ambassador—although only on condition that the British Government and he were agreed about policy on the Irish question, the League of Nations and on naval disarmament. These were the matters in the forefront of Anglo-American relationships, and ones which demanded urgent consideration. So far as naval disarmament and the future strength of the Royal Navy were concerned Grey argued that 'competition in navies between us and the U.S.A. would be from every point of view, disastrous!' Britain could gain nothing from a war against America, nor could she prevent the latter from building a bigger fleet than the Royal Navy if America chose to do so. Britain should, therefore, leave American naval strength out of account in future planning and base her next Navy estimates upon a European standard. It was better to trust to example than even to attempt to strike a bargain with America, for the latter course might well run the risk of provoking American agitation for the 'biggest-in-the-world Navy'. Finally, Grey held that the naval issue would dominate all other subjects due for discussion in Washington, and a wrong decision on it prejudice agreement on everything else.⁽¹⁴⁾

It seems that Grey, who was far from eager to go to Washington, expected his terms to result in a withdrawal of the invitation. But he was wrong. On 6th August 1919 Lord Curzon, then acting Foreign Secretary, told the Prime Minister that there was 'no difficulty about [the] Navy',⁽¹⁵⁾ and on 13th August Grey's appointment was announced to the House of Commons. It is true that, during the course of these negotiations, Lloyd George had made one reservation. This was that if such a naval policy as that advocated by Grey was, in fact, adopted, then 'there must be a response and reciprocity in the U.S.A. naval policy'. And Grey had agreed to this. Yet, whatever the Prime Minister meant—and that is not altogether clear—Grey accepted his appointment fully confident that the Admiralty would not be allowed to measure future British naval strength against that of the American Navy.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Admiralty, on the other hand, seem to have been unaware of the Prime Minister's commitment to Grey on future naval policy and neither then, nor later, were willing to renounce comparison with the United States as the proper basis for estimating the demands of a One-Power naval standard.

For the immediate future, however, Grey's known views forced the

Admiralty to develop their own ideas a stage further in 1919 during discussions on the preparation of the 1920 Navy Estimates. In November 1919, Lord Beatty, who had led the battle cruiser squadron at Jutland, became First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff* and, two months later, submitted a memorandum on naval policy to the Admiralty Board. Taking up some earlier Departmental proposals Beatty now, in January 1920, dwelt at length on the twin problems of the future size and the distribution of the Fleet; his emphasis, however, was on the first of the two.⁽¹⁷⁾ He quoted with approval an earlier Admiralty view that 'if the United States could not be induced to abandon or modify their 1916 programme, efforts would have to be made to undertake the construction required to counter-balance it,' and went on to outline the ways 'by which we can ensure maintaining our sea supremacy.' There might be an agreement to limit naval armaments; Britain might embark on a new shipbuilding programme to 'ensure that we are at least equal in material strength to the United States Navy as at present budgeted for'; or Britain might renew the Anglo-Japanese alliance 'on an offensive and defensive basis'. But whatever his anxieties about the future, Beatty considered it inconceivable that Britain should plan on continuing an alliance 'which can only have for its object protection against the United States,' and argued strongly that for economy, but also 'from the far mightier motive of a union between the English-speaking nations of the world', Britain should make an all-out effort to achieve an alliance or an entente with the United States based upon naval equality. If such an agreement proved impossible, then the Admiralty would ask for a ruling that a One-Power Standard measured against the strength of the most powerful nation other than Britain herself was the minimum standard of strength for the Royal Navy.⁽¹⁸⁾

There was, in fact, little difference between Grey and Beatty over the long-term objectives of naval policy *vis-à-vis* the United States. The differences were over means, not ends. And it was not unreasonable for the professional adviser to ask for an explicit ruling whether in a treaty or in a directive from his own government.

As it happened, and without in any way rejecting the case either for handling the Americans diplomatically or even for seeking an agreement with them, the Cabinet in practice gave the Admiralty the guidance Beatty asked for. In mid-February 1920 the First Lord submitted the Admiralty's views to the Cabinet, assuring his colleagues that he could formally announce acceptance of the One-Power Standard when presenting the new Naval Estimates to the House of Commons, without giving offence to any other country,

* Beatty continued to serve as First Sea Lord until July 1927.

simply by making it clear that this was a minimum standard of strength to which all previous governments had committed themselves.⁽¹⁹⁾ And although Ministers in their turn made it clear that they were anxious for yet further reductions in the size of the Fleet if possible, they did not oppose the First Lord's wishes. Accordingly, on 17th March 1920 Mr. Long announced in the House of Commons that the present government, in common with its predecessors, was committed to the principle that 'our Navy should not be inferior in strength to the navy of any other power.'⁽²⁰⁾

While these and subsequent discussions concerning both the Navy Estimates and the possibility of a naval treaty were going on, two further issues emerged which were of fundamental significance for the general framework of national and imperial defence. The first concerned the individual responsibilities of the three fighting Services in the general scheme of national defence; the second the place of the capital ship in the structure of the Royal Navy.

In June 1920 there was a long discussion in the C.I.D. on the future of the Committee itself and of its sub-committees and also on the future of the three Services in terms both of planning and operations. At the end of the meeting the Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, was instructed to prepare a comprehensive survey of the whole range of Britain's naval, military and air obligations, including not only those already long established but also those arising out of the Peace Treaties and the Covenant of the League of Nations.⁽²¹⁾ The paper, entitled, 'Survey of the Naval, Military and Air Obligations of the British Empire' was ready by the early autumn,⁽²²⁾ and although it does not appear as forming the starting point of discussion on any particular occasion, its subject matter was covered at several meetings of the C.I.D. during the winter of 1920-21 and the spring of 1921 at which the roles of the three Services were considered in detail.⁽²³⁾ Not the least interesting part of this general debate was that it offered the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, his first opportunity to put to his colleagues in the C.I.D. his detailed views on the future of air power, its proper part in national and imperial defence, and the consequent relationship of the Royal Air Force with the other two Services. All the views were here—at any rate in principle—which Trenchard continued to urge upon Ministers, Chiefs of Staff and his own subordinates in the Air Staff over the next decade, and which formed an important part of his claim to be regarded as the 'father of the Royal Air Force'.⁽²⁴⁾

The part of the Royal Air Force in national and imperial defence was discussed on at least three occasions in the spring of 1921,⁽²⁵⁾ largely on the basis of papers prepared by the Air Staff and presented to the C.I.D. by Trenchard himself. The presentation began with some general comments on 'the air as the primary medium of war'

and then proceeded to certain conclusions about the specific responsibilities which, it was argued, should be delegated to the Royal Air Force, if necessary at the expense of the Navy and the Army. Starting from the proposition that 'the aim of a nation which has taken up arms is to bring such pressure to bear upon the enemy people as to induce them to force their Government to sue for peace,' the argument then went on to claim that, in war, national morale would be most quickly and effectively attacked by threatening a whole people with the prospect of personal injury and loss rather than by restricting such threats to a narrow war zone occupied by fighting forces. Air power, in contrast to sea and land power, could bring about such an expansion of the threat, and that particularly in the case of the British Isles 'which have for so long enjoyed, by reason of their insular position and naval strength, a complete immunity from serious direct attack'. Finally, it was only by attack from the air that one country could 'reach the heart of another in the earliest days of war' thus offering the possibility of bringing about a final political solution much more quickly.⁽²⁶⁾ Here was the basis of air power theory, soon to be associated with the Italian writer Douhet, clearly formulated within the Royal Air Force before Douhet's famous work appeared in print.⁽²⁷⁾

For our purposes it is some of Trenchard's deductions from these general arguments which matter most. It was 'almost certain, therefore,' he claimed, 'that a Continental Power, situated within air range of our shores and engaged in fighting this country, will endeavour to end the war quickly by striking straight at our national morale through the air, rather than by circuitous, slower and more risky methods.' From this it further followed, in Trenchard's view, that the Royal Air Force should take over responsibility for the defence of the British Isles against air attack, against the threat of invasion from the sea and for coastal defence.⁽²⁸⁾ To be fair to Trenchard, he was concerned with long-term developments, not with the immediate future. Indeed, he admitted that during the next few years 'our Air Force could not be more than subsidiary to the surface craft, and therefore could only be treated as a contributing factor', at any rate in a fleet action.⁽²⁹⁾ But apart from that his ambitions had few bounds. He concluded with the words that what had moved the Air Staff to make these considerable claims was

'... that, in their opinion, the most important and efficient weapon for any of these purposes is the aeroplane itself. It will naturally want a certain amount of co-operation from surface craft and from guns, but what I would call the major part of the defensive weapon is the Air. Therefore the responsibilities should belong to the Air. . . .'⁽³⁰⁾

It may be that Trenchard, given that he was unavoidably arguing upon the basis of future forecasts rather than past experience, was convinced that he must pitch the claims of air power high in order to obtain even a limited degree of success. But whatever his reasons, his arguments fell not on deaf but certainly on largely unsympathetic ears. Tradition in these matters died hard. During the summer of 1920, and as its contribution to the survey by the Secretary of the C.I.D. of the military obligations of the British Empire, the Admiralty submitted a paper in which it claimed that Britain's supremacy at sea had 'long been recognised as the basis of our system of imperial defence' and, if maintained in the future, would be 'amply sufficient to fulfil all our treaty obligations and other commitments, both temporary and permanent.'⁽³¹⁾ And this view was supported by the Secretary himself in his own survey in which he gave top priority to the need to maintain naval superiority against any array of sea power likely to be brought against the Empire.⁽³²⁾ Moreover, during the course of the general debate in the first half of 1921 these views were supported by the C.I.D. as a whole. There were those who agreed with Trenchard that air forces would become of increasing importance in future wars and others who advocated delay not in order to thwart Trenchard but rather to investigate further the best division of responsibilities, e.g. between the Air Ministry and War Office where air defence was concerned, before coming to a decision. But it was also argued by some 'that the actual defence of the United Kingdom against aerial attack in a great war was only a small part of the whole problem'.⁽³³⁾ Moreover, given the current defence issues of importance, i.e. possible dangers from two Great Powers neither of which was in a position to harm British interests except by naval action, it is hardly surprising that the traditional priority and role of the Royal Navy were reaffirmed. Accordingly, although admittedly within the context of a debate on the development of the Singapore base, the C.I.D. noted with approval that:

'His Majesty's Government fully recognise that the basis of any system of Imperial defence against attack from overseas, whether upon the United Kingdom, Australasia or elsewhere, must be, as it always has been, the maintenance of our sea power'.⁽³⁴⁾

Simultaneously with this discussion, and at the heart of the purely naval part of it, there was lengthy debate on the future composition of the Fleet and particularly on the future role of battleships. As early as July 1919 the Admiralty set up a Post-War Questions Committee under the chairmanship of Vice-Admiral Phillimore to 'consider in the light of the experience of the war the military uses

and values of the different types of war vessel;' and when that committee reported in the spring of 1920, it concluded that

'... The Capital Ship is and will remain a necessity for naval warfare, and we are of opinion that she should retain her surface character.'⁽³⁵⁾

In other words, the battleship was to retain 'her old predominant position.'⁽³⁶⁾

When the members of the Committee of Imperial Defence came to discuss naval shipbuilding policy the following December, with possible American and Japanese building programmes very much in mind, they already knew of the findings of the Phillimore Committee.⁽³⁷⁾ But Ministers, very largely on grounds of cost, were by no means happy with the Admiralty's plans for new battleship construction and decided—against the wishes of the Chief of Naval Staff—to conduct another enquiry of their own through a sub-committee whose members were instructed 'to hear such evidence as they may think fit upon the question of the capital ship in the Royal Navy in view of modern scientific developments and the experience of the recent war.'⁽³⁸⁾ This sub-committee met under the chairmanship of Mr. Bonar Law, and its final report was ready by the beginning of March 1921.⁽³⁹⁾ It was not a happy committee or a unanimous report. The airmen, as well as some naval officers, were either moderately doubtful about the future value of battleships or convinced that their day was past. On the other hand the Admiralty, and Mr. Winston Churchill, as Secretary of State for War and for the Royal Air Force, argued powerfully both for the battleship in principle and for a new building programme in the immediate future. Moreover, the uncommitted members of the sub-committee, including the chairman, while not entirely persuaded by the Admiralty case, also made it clear that they had not been presented with convincing evidence that the battleship was obsolete. Thus while there was no agreement for a new building programme, the battleship remained as the central unit of the Fleet and figured as such during the international negotiations shortly to begin at Washington. It is to these negotiations we now turn.

As 1920 wore on it seemed that the Americans were still far from contemplating any reduction in their own capital ship programme. In November of that year, therefore, the Admiralty faced the Cabinet with the need for a decision between new construction or inferiority in three years' time. Their calculations were revealing. Britain had only one capital ship, *Hood*, which embodied war experience in an important degree, and unless new building began immediately that would still be the position in 1925. By that date, and by carrying on

with their 1916 programme, the United States would have twelve ships of over 40,000 tons and four of over 30,000 tons, all of post-Jutland design. By 1925 Japan would have at least eight similar ships, and by 1928 sixteen. Further, the number of ships Britain must strike off as obsolete far exceeded those to be discarded by the other two Powers.* The First Lord of the Admiralty argued that the improbability of war between Britain and America was the sole justification for admitting approximate equality to be the right relationship between the two navies, consistent with the security of the Empire. If comparison with any other power were involved—say Japan—then he would press for, and the Empire demand, much more than equality. In any case, he could not accept the argument that the very improbability of a war against America justified the deliberate sacrifice of Britain's naval supremacy. It would be folly to suppose that Britain could sink to second or third place in actual naval strength and retain the prestige and advantages of being first merely by leaving America out of her calculations. The rest of the world would make no such omission and would soon recognise who was first and who second. He asked, therefore, for the beginning of a building programme in 1921-22 which would, by 1925, safeguard Britain's position of equality—always assuming that no further construction programmes were undertaken by America or Japan meanwhile.⁽⁴¹⁾

In mid-December 1920 consideration of these matters was taken up by the C.I.D. At the first of several meetings at which future naval shipbuilding policy and some related subjects were discussed in detail, the Prime Minister struck a properly solemn note by emphasising to the ministerial and professional members of the Committee that this was 'about the most important question that had ever been submitted to them—the most important and the most difficult'.⁽⁴²⁾ The problem which faced the Committee was to determine the kind of Navy upon which Britain would have to depend in the future for the defence of the Empire, and for the guarding of Imperial lines of communication. But this could clearly not be isolated from the wider problem of world naval competition, and of the political circumstances from which such rivalry arose.

A major European enemy, at least for this purpose, was ruled out entirely. Britain's concern in naval matters was with the United States and with Japan. Could she afford to fall behind either, or both, in naval strength? Could she possibly afford open competition with the far greater resources of America? And what would America do about Britain's war debt to her of £1,000 million in the meantime? To complicate matters further there was the strong and still growing

* Beatty prepared a memorandum on this subject for the First Lord in July 1920.⁽⁴⁰⁾

rivalry between the United States and Japan in the Pacific. Whatever the advantages or disadvantages of an accommodation between Great Britain and the United States, it clearly could not be divorced from the existing Anglo-Japanese Treaty which would come up for renewal in 1921. In fact, the connected problems of naval competition and disarmament were at this point inseparably linked with Pacific politics and strategy as a whole.

The Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1902, renewed in 1905 and again in 1911, is a landmark in the development of British defence policy. It provided for the maintenance of peace in East Asia and in India, for the protection of the territorial rights of the signatories in those areas, and for the mutual defence of their special interests against unprovoked attack. It also purported to protect the common interests of all the Powers in China by ensuring the integrity and independence of that country and by providing for the maintenance of the 'open door' policy in commerce. The alliance originated in a period when each of the two Powers needed the help of the other against the ambitions of third parties, particularly Russia. But while, for Britain, the alliance was designed to protect interests originally established in a virtual monopoly period against the encroachment of new rivals, for Japan it was something more. Not only did the alliance protect her special interests in Korea; it also gave her her first international recognition as a Great Power, and virtually ensured her security in the early steps of what later became a policy of hegemony in East Asia. What is more, although the revised form of the treaty in 1911 had safeguarded Britain's position if Japan should be involved in a war against the United States, that had not prevented it from being regarded by Americans with suspicion and dislike.⁽⁴³⁾

One further aspect of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty is of importance here. It had enabled Japan, in 1904, to settle her account with Russia in a one-to-one war instead of involving her also with Russia's ally, France.* For Britain the military gain was less obvious but certainly not less important. For two hundred years past Britain had in practice, if not in theory, calculated her naval requirements on a Two-Power Standard basis, i.e. a navy at least equal in size to the combined navies of those two Powers most likely to be ranged against her. For a long time this combination had been the Bourbon family group of France and Spain. In the second half of the nineteenth century the combination became that of France and Russia. At the time of the Naval Defence Act of 1889 the First Lord of the Admiralty expressly declared 'that our establishment

* The treaty of 1902 provided that each party would give military assistance to the other if it was engaged in a war with more than one enemy. In 1904-05 France did not fight beside Russia.

should be on such a scale that it should at least be equal to the naval strength of any two other countries'.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Nor was this simply Tory jingoism. Four years later the Liberal Government reaffirmed the desirable minimum standard of Britain's naval strength as 'equality with the Navies of the two next powers, France and Russia.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

In practice, however, the Two-Power Standard was then already inadequate. It served its purpose when the principal ports and sea-areas to be defended or attacked were substantially limited to the western shores of Europe and the Mediterranean, the areas where fleet actions were almost certain to take place and where the trade routes of the world converged to provide worthwhile targets. But when Russia began to build up her Far Eastern fleet in the last years of the nineteenth century a new situation developed. What was needed was not merely a two-power navy, in the old sense, to deal with the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Home Waters, but also a Far Eastern squadron of steadily increasing size to deal with the strongest rival fleet in that area. Moreover, all this time France was the ally of Russia, and herself a naval power of no small significance in the Far East as well as in the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

For Britain, the only alternatives as solutions to this problem of widely separated and virtually exclusive naval theatres were either a massive fleet building programme or an ally who would take some of the responsibility from her shoulders. She chose the second. From the beginning of the Anglo-Japanese negotiations in 1901 the Japanese tried to insist that both Japan and Britain should each 'maintain in the Far East at all times naval forces superior in efficacy to the naval strength of any other Power which has the largest naval forces in the Far East'.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Equally from the beginning, the British Government made clear their objection to any arrangement, such as that suggested by Japan, which might fetter their discretion in arranging the world-wide distribution of Britain's fleets according to the varying needs of the moment. The terms of the final agreement on this particular point were worded ambiguously. Each of the two signatories declared its intention 'to maintain, so far as may be possible, available for concentration in the waters of the Extreme East a naval force superior to that of any third Power'.⁽⁴⁷⁾ What in practice happened, in 1902-03, was that Britain reduced the strength of her China squadron and refused, despite Japanese complaints, to build it up to the strength of Russia's Far Eastern fleet on the ground that she needed her vessels nearer home. In other words, the discretion in the distribution of her fleets which Britain gained by the alliance meant, in effect, greater freedom to concentrate her strength in European waters.

Nor did this situation, in principle, end with the diplomatic developments of the years 1904-07. The old enemies, France and

Russia, were now replaced by an even more menacing one. Germany, with naval as well as military ambitions, now focussed all Britain's attention on the Channel and the North Sea. And when war broke out in 1914 that concentration of effort was rendered all the more possible because Japan took over naval responsibilities in the Pacific which Britain would have been hard put to it to bear alone. Little wonder, then, that when these problems arose again in a new form after the First World War, there were many in Britain who were convinced that the Anglo-Japanese alliance had served her well, and who preferred to go on building on the assured friendships of the past rather than attempt to discover new and perhaps uncertain ones for the future. 1902 was a date of great significance in the minds of those responsible for Britain's naval strategy in 1921.

Once the future of the Anglo-Japanese alliance had been raised, Ministers in London, in the latter part of 1920 and the early months of 1921, tended to concentrate more attention upon this as a solution of Pacific and naval problems than upon a broader Pacific agreement or some specific disarmament treaty. This was undoubtedly, to some extent, a result of the fact that there had so far been no official approach from the United States Government on the problem of disarmament. Whether it was fair to expect the first move to come from Washington is another matter. The fact is that, at this stage, some members of the Cabinet appear to have been thinking not so much in terms of positive disarmament—much though they wanted that—as of avoiding an armaments race by renewing the alliance with Japan to offset what looked like permanent British naval weakness in the Far East. The Foreign Secretary, in particular, argued that 'there would be a concrete danger if the Alliance was not renewed'.

These views had already been made clear both at the important meeting of the C.I.D. already referred to,^{(48)*} and in a Foreign Office memorandum, prepared some time before, and now issued to the Governments of the Empire in preparation for the Imperial Conference of 1921.⁽⁴⁹⁾ The memorandum freely admitted the vital need for good relations with the United States 'whose friendship is of prime importance to us from the point of view of material interests and racial affinity'. On the other hand, and for reasons by no means fully explained, it was contended that in spite of similarity of interests Britain would find it 'of extreme difficulty' to draw up a satisfactory working agreement on Pacific matters with the United States. Indeed, it was argued that should such an agreement seek to hinder Japanese ambitions in China then 'we should have to be sure of the active support of the United States, upon which, as recent events have shown us, we are unable to rely. We should, besides, have to

* See above, p. 9.

maintain in the Far East a fleet and an army beyond our resources'. Failing, therefore, the ideal solution, that is some sort of tripartite agreement on the Far East between Britain, America and Japan, to which France might also adhere, a renewal of the alliance with Japan was the next best arrangement and the likeliest practicable one. Only, the renewal would have to be on terms explicitly acceptable to the United States. And again there was no explanation of why it was thought possible that the United States might accept a renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance instead of some form of agreement between Britain and herself.

The Foreign Office memorandum argued the strategic case for the Japanese alliance in words worth quoting at some length:

'The exposed position of the Empire in the Pacific renders it highly desirable to have a friendly Japan. If the Alliance were not renewed, we should find ourselves confronted with a suspicious and possibly hostile Japan which would cause us considerable embarrassment in China, India, and the Far East generally. Owing to our present need of economy and the increasing naval strength of Japan, it is not possible for us to maintain forces in the Far East sufficient to support a strong policy involving a possible coercion of Japan, or even a fleet equal in size to hers . . . the only alternative to maintaining in the Pacific a fleet capable of dealing with Japan would appear to be a renewal of the alliance from which we might at times derive useful support in the future as we have done in the past.'⁽⁵⁰⁾

This was, in principle, the position in which Britain had found herself in 1902. And the strategic problem posed here was to remain basically the same throughout the 1930's and down to the outbreak of war in the Pacific in December 1941.

The final argument in favour of going on as before, and one that was used again in a slightly modified form in the nineteen-thirties, was that, as Japan's ally, Britain would carry more weight with her and thus more control.

'The existence of some form of agreement with Japan would . . . render it easier for His Majesty's Government to keep a watch on her movements in China, to demand of her in her dealings with us a greater measure of freedom and frankness than it would otherwise be possible to expect, and to exercise a moderating influence on her policy generally. It is true that our relations with her in China may be difficult in the future, but they will probably be less so if she is bound to us even by a loose alliance, and much less so than if she were to become the ally of Russia or Germany or of both.'⁽⁵¹⁾

When the Imperial Conference met in London on 20th June 1921 these views were explained in detail. On the strategic side Mr. Balfour made it perfectly clear that 'it is the opinion of the Committee of Imperial Defence that a renewal of the Treaty with Japan is a most desirable object'.⁽⁵²⁾ Britain's weakness in the Far East would, of course, be lessened by the construction of a major base at Singapore, a plan already approved in principle.⁽⁵³⁾ But such a base would take a long time to build and would not, on its own, provide a complete solution.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Discussion of these matters at the Imperial Conference was both prolonged and, sometimes, bitter. The representatives of Australia and New Zealand were in general agreement with the British view. The former, in particular, argued that there was as yet no concrete evidence that America would be any more willing to discuss disarmament without the Anglo-Japanese Treaty than with it. He also claimed that, failing disarmament—admittedly the most desirable objective but one towards which the American Government had, so far, taken no positive steps—the only way to insure against the Empire's prospective naval inferiority in the Pacific was by alliance with another naval Power.⁽⁵⁵⁾

But Mr. Meighen, Prime Minister of Canada, was bitterly opposed. This was not altogether unexpected. In February 1921, Sir Robert Borden, Meighen's predecessor, had suggested to London a general conference of Pacific Powers to discuss some alternative to the Anglo-Japanese alliance which he considered a serious threat to future Anglo-American understanding. Indeed, he was himself prepared to make the initial overtures to Washington if that were thought desirable.⁽⁵⁶⁾ But Sir Robert was given no encouragement. Now, in June, his successor took up the same theme. Mr. Meighen refused to believe that any agreement between Britain and Japan, no matter in what form, could fail to injure Britain's relations with the United States. Moreover, he took the view that the most desirable solution of the problems of Imperial economy and defence, i.e. agreed disarmament, was possible; but that the participation of America was essential, and that that participation would be hopelessly impeded by the renewal of a treaty which many Americans could only regard as directed in some measure against their own country. Finally, he argued that although many people claimed that Japan had loyally observed her part of the bargain so far, yet she had for long past pursued her own selfish ends and would continue to do so.⁽⁵⁷⁾

This conflict of views was resolved somewhat unexpectedly. Although not optimistic about the possibilities of general naval disarmament, British Ministers had all along considered that a renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, on conditions acceptable to

all interested Powers, could be arranged as part of a general conference on Pacific problems. And the Foreign Secretary's preliminary discussions at this point with the Ambassadors of the United States and Japan, and with the Chinese Minister, about the possibility of holding such a conference were most promising. The Japanese Ambassador anticipated that his Government would welcome an opportunity to redress what they now realised to be a mistaken policy towards China. The Chinese Minister was eager for the chance to revise an Anglo-Japanese treaty which, he said, had prevented Britain from exerting an impartial influence for the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations in the past. Mr. Harvey, the American Ambassador, treating his Government's assent to a conference as certain, proceeded immediately to go into details of time and place.⁽⁵⁸⁾

3. *The Washington Conference, July 1921-February 1922*

On 11th July 1921, President Harding made public his invitation to all the former Allied and Associated Powers to a disarmament conference in Washington.* At the same time he suggested a conference on Pacific and Far East questions among those nations most concerned.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The opening plenary session of the Washington Conference took place on 12th November 1921. After that the work of the Conference was divided between two Committees, one on disarmament and one on political questions, each reporting on occasion to further plenary meetings. The first Committee consisted of the five major naval Powers, U.S.A., Britain, Japan, France and Italy; on the second were represented all the nine Powers attending the Conference, i.e. those already mentioned together with China, Portugal, Holland and Belgium.

The political problems will be dealt with only briefly here, although it must be remembered that it was agreement on these matters which alone made any disarmament arrangements possible.⁽⁶¹⁾ There were two issues to be considered. First that of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty. Second, that of the future of China. In the first matter the Japanese were, from the start, extremely helpful and made no attempt to include in a new treaty any provision for renewing the old one. Further, neither Britain nor Japan raised any objection to the wish of the American Government to include France in a wider treaty to replace the existing one between Japan and Britain. And so a Four Power Treaty was signed on 10th December between the Governments of the United States, Britain, France and Japan which replaced the treaty of 1902. By it the Four Powers

* The venue of the conference was itself an item in Anglo-American rivalry.⁽⁵⁹⁾

agreed to common consultation should any dispute occur between them arising out of Pacific questions; and they further agreed to consult and arrange between themselves measures designed to deal with an emergency produced by the aggression of any other Power.

The negotiations about China took longer and were not completed until early February 1922. By the Nine Power Treaty, officially adopted at a plenary meeting of the Conference on 4th February, the fundamental principles of China's integrity and sovereignty were formally affirmed in a manner which, it was hoped, would render it difficult for any one of the signatories to flout them easily.

The disarmament work of the Conference must be dealt with in more detail. Once the Washington Conference had been arranged, the C.I.D., briefed by the Admiralty, gave a good deal of time to the details of naval disarmament. The Committee came to the conclusion that the only method of disarmament sufficiently simple to be practicable was to limit the numbers of capital ships on an agreed proportional basis among the Powers, and it rejected such alternatives as a building holiday and limitations by tonnage. The Committee did not approve of a building holiday because Britain had already had one since the end of the war, and was now behind her potential rivals as a consequence. Limitation by total tonnage was rejected because, with Imperial commitments demanding more vessels of various sizes than those of other nations, Britain would either have to reduce the tonnage—and the fighting efficiency—of her capital ships, or else have an inadequate number of vessels in the smaller classes. Limitation of tonnage of individual vessels, and limitation of total expenditure on armaments were dismissed as posing too many technical problems. And so the Committee recommended that the British delegation should work for numerical limitation of capital ships together with, though as an ideal unlikely to be achieved, the abolition of submarines.⁽⁶²⁾

At Washington, however, matters went differently. At the first plenary meeting on 12th November Mr. Hughes, the United States Secretary of State, took everyone by surprise with a scheme of his own for the limitation of naval armaments. He proposed a capital ship building holiday of ten years, the scrapping of many existing capital ships by the three major naval Powers, and a replacement programme after the holiday calculated, like the retention of vessels during that period, on a 5:5:3 basis such as was eventually agreed upon for America, Britain and Japan. His scheme also included comparable proportionate totals in other classes of warships.

What the British Naval Staff, both among its representatives at Washington and in the Admiralty at home, most objected to was the proposed building holiday. In the first place America's production

capacity was such that she could, when the holiday ended, build a new fleet far more rapidly than could Britain. Secondly, this state of affairs would be aggravated by the much heavier wear and tear that the British fleet would be subjected to in the normal course of its duties in the meantime. Thirdly, the Naval Staff argued that the tonnage limitation on individual capital ships, also proposed by Mr. Hughes, would make it difficult to provide protection against air and under-water attack, thus tending to hasten the process of obsolescence as aircraft and submarines were improved.

Among all these objections the sailors decided to concentrate their attack on what alarmed them most. Lord Beatty, First Sea Lord and the senior British naval representative at Washington, therefore proposed that a slow but steady capital ship replacement programme should be substituted for a complete building holiday.⁽⁶³⁾ And in this, it is interesting to note, he was supported by all the Empire delegates at Washington.⁽⁶⁴⁾ But the Government in London, despite the advice given by the C.I.D. before the conference began, took a firm stand in support of Mr. Hughes' original proposal, and did so primarily for political reasons. Ministers were impressed with the effect which, so they thought, the simple declaration of a naval building holiday would have on public opinion, and considered that Britain would gravely injure her moral status in the eyes of other nations if she refused to follow the American lead.⁽⁶⁵⁾ On this major issue, therefore, technical arguments were over-ridden.

From here onwards the capital ship problem, at least among the major naval Powers, though difficult proved tractable. The arrangements which were incorporated in the final treaty were reached by mid-December. Apart from agreed replacement tonnage, the signatory Powers declared a capital ship building holiday for ten years from November, 1921. Further, Britain and America were to retain, of their existing capital ships, only 20 and 18 vessels respectively, and Japan 10, representing a total replacement tonnage of 525,000 tons for the first two and 315,000 tons for Japan—the well known 5:5:3 formula. All other capital ships above these totals were to be destroyed. And, when assessing the importance of the Washington Conference, it is worth remembering that this decision involved the scrapping of nearly 2,000,000 tons of battleships by the three Powers. An upper limit of 35,000 tons was set to the displacement of new capital ships when building began after the holiday. Finally, France and Italy were by these same arrangements to be limited to a capital ship total of 175,000 tons each. Much smaller totals for aircraft carriers on a comparable basis were also agreed upon.

Attempts at further measures of armaments limitation failed. France made it quite clear that she intended to retain large land forces against the revival of Germany; and there was clearly no way

of dissuading her other than by the provision of a guarantee by America and Britain such as had already been refused in 1919.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The attempt to devise some form of air limitation broke down over the argument that any limitation of military air power, because of its inter-dependence with the civil air industry, would be impracticable without devising technical methods of enforcement. In fact, no one country argued the case for air limitation strongly enough to persuade others to do likewise. The attempt to abolish submarines was made solely by the British and Empire representatives. And it was made in vain. The general reaction was that it had been the German methods of using submarines which had been wrong during the war, and that the weapon itself could be reconciled with the recognised usages of warfare. Discussions on the subject were therefore largely confined to the problem of regulating the use of submarines and ended with the adoption of the 'Root Resolutions'. What is more, since the representatives at Washington found it impossible to agree to a limitation of submarine tonnage, there was no chance of any limitation on the numbers and tonnage of the smaller craft needed to counter submarine warfare.⁽⁶⁷⁾

One further subject of military importance had taken up some time. As part of the bargaining over capital ship limitation the major naval Powers agreed to a *status quo* in regard to naval bases and fortifications in the Pacific, i.e. an agreement not to build new bases or fortifications, or to undertake work on existing ones other than normal repair. So far as Britain was concerned, this affected Hong Kong and all British territory east of the meridian 110° of east longitude, except for the territory of Australia, New Zealand and islands off the coast of Canada. Singapore, it should be noted, was not included in the restriction.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Finally the treaty was to last until 31st December 1936, provided two years notice of intention to terminate it was given—a provision of which Japan was to take advantage in 1934.*

The Washington Treaty of 1922, like the Anglo-Japanese treaty of twenty years before, is a landmark in the development of national and imperial defence. In the first place, as a substantial measure of disarmament (indeed, taken in conjunction with the London Naval Treaty of 1930, the only agreed measure of disarmament of the inter-war years) it embodied from Britain's point of view the need for economy and economic recovery. Whatever the criticisms of the Treaty it did prevent, for the immediate future, a costly naval arms race which Britain was in no state to sustain. And it is worth remembering that the Admiralty had from the first been anxious to do that.

* See below, Chap. V, Section 3.

Secondly, as the inevitable corollary of an arms agreement, Britain had to accept a One-Power naval standard *vis-à-vis* the United States, and a limited superiority in capital ships over Japan. When acceptance of the One-Power Standard had been announced originally in March 1920, it implied, as we have seen, the promise of the British Government to build up the strength of the Royal Navy to equality with the Navy of the other strongest naval Power.* But the Government really wanted to reduce, not to increase expenditure, and Washington achieved this by a general scaling down. The joint results of that success were an apparent easing of Anglo-American naval rivalry and a clear renunciation by Britain of her traditional supremacy on the high seas.

It is worth looking forward, briefly, at the practical implications for Britain of the ratios now established for naval strength among the great Powers.

The One-Power Standard was subsequently defined as:

'satisfied if our fleet, wherever situated, is equal to the fleet of any other nation, wherever situated, provided that arrangements are made from time to time in different parts of the world, according as the International situation requires, to enable the local forces to maintain the situation against vital and irreparable damage pending the arrival of the Main Fleet, and to give the Main Fleet on arrival sufficient mobility.'⁽⁶⁹⁾

Clearly the significance of any such definition, and the standard of strength it implied, would depend on circumstances. War against the United States—the equal Power—was, for all practical purposes, ruled out. At this stage it was considered most unlikely, and in the rearmament years of the 1930's it was explicitly excluded. In terms of war against Japan, and Japan was the naval Power against whom British strength was normally measured before 1933, the One-Power Standard of the Washington Treaty meant a forty per cent superiority in capital ships. This represented only a reasonable margin of safety in conditions in which the Royal Navy would almost certainly be under the disadvantage of operating at a great distance from its home bases. The standard also implied a base at which the Main Fleet could rendezvous, and the resources of which would give that Fleet 'sufficient mobility'—a condition which was not remotely satisfied during the nineteen-twenties. What the One-Power Standard did not allow was a reasonable margin, or indeed any margin of safety if Britain were to be at war with a major European Power and Japan at the same time. No calculated dispersal of a One-

* See above, p. 9.

Power Standard fleet could enable it to contain two such widely separated enemies while retaining the power to concentrate against either at need. And the fallacy of the idea that local forces could 'maintain the situation against vital and irreparable damage' was clearly shown in the disaster of December 1941.*

In other words, the One-Power Standard could never be an adequate standard of naval strength for a Power with world-wide responsibilities, unless she depended in addition on allies. Washington was, to that extent a further comment on the impossibility of reconciling world-wide responsibilities with the limited resources of a small island Power which has been a central problem of Britain's defence policy since the beginning of this century. It was, however, understandable that this long-term prospect should have been ignored in what Mr. Churchill was later to describe as the 'lower temperature . . . much cooler spirit and . . . entirely different atmosphere . . .' of the nineteen-twenties.

Finally, Washington was in one sense a backward looking treaty. Its negotiators were mainly concerned with what were becoming the weapons of the past; few people had yet become aware of the full significance of aircraft and submarines as the weapons of the future.

4. *The Geneva Naval Conference, 1927*

After the signing of the Locarno Pacts of 1925† disarmament discussions, under the auspices of the League of Nations, grew more purposeful. The first result of this was the convening of a new naval disarmament conference at Geneva in the autumn of 1927. In fact, the conference achieved nothing. It is important to consider it briefly here, however, partly to understand why negotiations failed, and also in order to understand the reasons for Britain's contribution to that failure.

In addition to major capital ship restrictions, the Washington Treaty had placed an upper limit on the tonnage and gun calibre of cruisers.⁽⁷⁰⁾ But this was only a beginning to a solution of the problem of limitation of smaller classes, and it was with these smaller classes that the conferences of 1927 and 1930 were mainly concerned. The Naval Staff were all too well aware of the problems posed by the increasing cost of warships and the reluctance of Parliament to spend freely on naval defence. In this context further international agreement, as in 1922, might be made to serve the dual purposes of

* See below, pp. 336-45.

† See below, p. 42.

economy and security. The Naval Staff considered, first, that the upper limits of 10,000 tons displacement and 8-inch guns imposed on cruiser construction at Washington were too high; in their view these should at some time be reduced to 7,500 tons and 6-inch armament. Cruisers of the larger type were already in existence (indeed, between 1922 and 1927 13 such vessels had been laid down by the navies of the British Empire) and some compromise would have to be reached about them until they became obsolete. Further in the interest of economy the Admiralty were willing to agree to an extension of the life of capital ships beyond the period agreed to at Washington.

The need for this compromise brought forth the second and main argument of the Naval Staff on the problem of cruisers. Cruisers, they argued, had two functions—Fleet work and control of sea communications. Large 8-inch gun cruisers were eminently suitable for Fleet work, and the numbers needed could easily be calculated in relation to capital ships on the basis of five cruisers for every three capital ships. This, reckoned in relation to the capital ship figures agreed at Washington, produced the following Fleet cruiser needs for the three leading naval Powers—

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| British Empire | 25 cruisers |
| United States of America | 25 cruisers |
| Japan | 15 cruisers |

In regard to the problem of control of sea communications, however, the Naval Staff argued that—

‘ . . . the number of cruisers required is dependent mainly upon the length of the sea routes to be defended and the density of the trade normally using the routes, this latter being also a measure of the importance of the route to the nation whose ships traverse it.

By multiplying the tonnage normally at sea on defined ocean routes by the length of the route to be traversed a factor termed “ton—mileage” can be obtained.

An analysis of the shipping actually at sea on the 1st April 1926, shows that the ton—mileage factor for the 3 principal sea Powers was as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| British Empire | 27,229,492,000 |
| United States of America | 12,379,311,000 |
| Japan | 3,757,721,000 |

In addition, these 3 Powers owned tonnage at sea not on defined ocean routes to the amount of 2,446,000, 153,000 and 200,000 tons respectively.

Frequent and repeated investigations of the strategical problem involved in the defence of this huge commitment has shown that 45 cruisers is the bare minimum number that can afford reasonable protection to our trade. On this basis the number of cruisers required is as follows:

| | <i>Fleet</i> | <i>Trade</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| British Empire | 25 | 45 | 70 |
| United States of America | 25 | 22 | 47 |
| Japan | 15 | 6 | 21 |

... It is of great importance in this connection to emphasise that the needs of the British Empire for the protection of trade are absolute and not relative, and that for this reason no reduction on the 45 for this purpose can be accepted.'⁽⁷¹⁾

It was the statement of absolute need for trade protection and the resultant claim for superiority in numbers of smaller cruisers over other countries which caused the failure of the Geneva Conference. At the time there were those within the British Government including the Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, who thought that more careful diplomatic preparation would have promised if not ensured success.

'No doubt,' he wrote later, 'a great mistake was made in entering upon such a Conference without a preliminary exchange of ideas, and for this I must take a share of the blame. I confess that I did not foresee in any way the rigidity of the American attitude, and I was afraid that any enquiry as to the views of the State Department might be regarded as unsympathetic and as dictated by a desire to find a means of declining the President's invitation.'⁽⁷²⁾

But Chamberlain's implication was surely over-optimistic. The British attitude was no less rigid than that of the Americans. And in 1927 there was not, as there was in 1930, strong political pressure from the Cabinet to persuade the Naval Staff to modify their views.*

The scene was set early on when U.S. Admiral Hilary Jones had talks with the First Sea Lord, Admiral Beatty, while returning from the Disarmament Conference at Geneva. It was then that Beatty made it clear that while fully accepting parity with the United States in battleships Britain could not commit herself to the same principle in cruisers; to which the reply of the American General Board was that 'equality with Great Britain is the sole basis on which a just treaty limitation can be imposed.'⁽⁷³⁾ There the gap remained,

* See below, Section 5, for the 1929-30 discussions.

despite some concessionary moves on both sides. The British continued to argue that 'a number of small cruisers are of vital necessity to an Empire whose widely scattered parts are divided from each other by seas and oceans, and whose most populous parts are dependent for their daily bread on sea-borne trade';⁽⁷⁴⁾ while the Americans would not give up their position that a successful outcome to the conference depended upon an 'agreed basis of parity for all units'.⁽⁷⁵⁾ In the matter of heavy cruisers the British were all along ready to agree to parity with the United States, with the Washington treaty ratio applying to Japan. So far as light cruisers were concerned the Cabinet in London was unwilling to surrender its freedom of action and that, in practice, implied an acceptance of the Admiralty's 'absolute' need for trade protection.⁽⁷⁶⁾ In a telegram to the British Delegation at Geneva justifying their stand the Government quoted words originally spoken by Lord Balfour to an American audience several years before—

'Suppose for example, that your Western States were suddenly removed 10,000 miles across the sea. Suppose that the very heart of your Empire was a small and crowded island depending upon oversea trade not merely for its luxuries but for the raw material of those manufactures by which its superabundant population lives, and for the food upon which they subsist. Suppose it was a familiar thought that there was never a moment of the year when within the limits of your State there was more than seven weeks' food for its population, and that that food could only be replenished by oversea communication. If you will draw this picture, and if you will realise all that it implies, you will understand why it is that no citizen of the British Empire, whether he be drawn from the far Dominions of the Pacific or lives in a small island in the North Sea, can ever forget that it is by sea communication that he lives, and that without sea communication he and the Empire to which he belongs would perish together.'⁽⁷⁷⁾

5. *The London Naval Conference, 1930*

There were several reasons why, despite the failure of 1927, the whole problem of naval disarmament should be taken up again. There was, it is true, a temporary worsening in relations with America in 1928 with news of an Anglo-French naval agreement which appeared to give Britain what she had only recently been denied by America.⁽⁷⁸⁾ One result of this was the American Cruiser Bill, passed by the Senate in February 1929, providing for a very substantial large cruiser programme. However, the election of Mr. Hoover as President in late 1928 and the appointment of Mr.

MacDonald as Prime Minister in June 1929 saw two political leaders in office both of whom were determined to reach a further arms limitation agreement if possible.*

At Geneva, in the spring of 1929, the United States Government indicated its willingness to consider methods of estimating equivalent naval values which would take into account Britain's need for a large number of small cruisers. Soon afterwards Mr. MacDonald formed his second Labour Administration. The Labour Government came into power pledged to sign the 'optional clause' of the statute of the Permanent Court of International Justice, and fulfilled this pledge in September 1929.⁽⁷⁹⁾† In this atmosphere it was easy for the British and American Governments to come together. The summer months of 1929 were spent in promising discussions between the two governments on the subject of further naval disarmament, and in October an invitation was issued by Mr. MacDonald to the Governments of the United States, France, Italy and Japan to attend a naval conference in London in January 1930.

In his preliminary negotiations with the American ambassador in this country in the summer of 1929 Mr. MacDonald was helped, as he later freely admitted, by substantial concessions from the British Admiralty and the American Navy Board. The latter agreed to limitations on 8-inch cruisers which went contrary to their belief that it was these vessels which the United States Navy needed most. They also agreed to a yardstick proposal whereby a small American numerical preponderance in large cruisers would be offset by a larger British preponderance in the small 6-inch class.‡ The British Admiralty, for its part, had accepted the principle of parity in all categories of vessels, which Mr. Stimson had declared 'an immense and tremendous step forward.' They had also reduced their 'absolute' estimates of Britain's cruiser needs from 70 to 50, and had accepted tonnage figures in all categories considerably lower than those which they were prepared to agree to in 1927 and below the figures which, in the opinion of the Admiralty, gave security if strategy alone were considered. It is clear that the Prime Minister acted, at any rate in these preliminary talks, only after full consultation with

* This is not to imply that Mr. Baldwin would not have responded to the new American approach had he stayed in office; in fact he seems to have become, by 1929, more ready for an agreement than he had been in 1927.

† The 'optional clause' was ultimately embodied as Article 36 of the Permanent Court of International Justice. This was a provision which enabled States, when adhering to the Statute of the Court, to exercise the option of accepting its jurisdiction as compulsory, and without special agreement in certain classes of legal disputes.

‡ This 'yardstick' proposal was a source of some embarrassment to both sides during the talks since what the Americans had intended as a gesture of goodwill and a subject for discussion tended to be interpreted by the British as a definite commitment in terms favourable to the British point of view.

his naval advisers.^{(80)*} On the other hand, it is equally clear that from the beginning of exploratory talks in the summer of 1929 the politicians on both sides were agreed to keep control of negotiations in their own hands, arguing that it was the undue influence of the naval experts which had spoiled the chances of agreement in 1927.⁽⁸¹⁾ This, at any rate so far as the British were concerned, was somewhat unfair in its assessment of those earlier events.

In the autumn the Prime Minister continued the negotiations during a personal visit to the United States. Before leaving for this visit he gave a full account of negotiations so far to the Cabinet, and there now clearly emerged two provisos which alone had made the Admiralty concessions possible. In the first place, the reduced figures the Admiralty had accepted represented their estimate of the lowest naval strength necessary to discharge the responsibilities not of preparing for actual war but of watching the current preparations of other navies and of building in relation to these. The reduction of the cruiser total to 50 was, in particular, acceptable only 'if the European situation was so improved as to give reasonable security for ten or twelve years, with a chance of further improvement'. Secondly, the Admiralty declared categorically that 'they could regard naval requirements as satisfied for a limited period with a number of 50 cruisers, provided proper provision was made in the meanwhile for the steady replacement of our war built cruisers which was an essential condition'.⁽⁸²⁾

It was with these provisos in mind, already made clear to, and thought to be accepted by, the Cabinet, that the Naval Staff drew up their own detailed proposals as a basis for negotiation for the conference.⁽⁸³⁾ And it was at this point that serious disagreement between Ministers and their naval advisers emerged. The Admiralty, as we have seen, wanted a steady process of replacement, particularly within the reduced cruiser class. This involved a building programme over the next five years estimated to cost £56 million and therefore actually larger and more expensive than that carried out by the previous Conservative Government. The Treasury countered with proposals designed to effect a substantial reduction instead of an increase in the Navy Estimates by 1936, admitting that

* Lord Chatfield, to whom I am indebted for much helpful comment in this and other sections, wrote on this passage as follows: 'The Labour First Lord, Alexander, overruled the Admiralty Sea Lords and the First Sea Lord resigned a little later from ill health. The Prime Minister did not act on the Sea Lords' advice but, at a night conference, when the Sea Lords were not invited, a political decision to give way to the U.S.A. and Japan was made by the Prime Minister.' (Private notes written by Lord Chatfield to the author).

I do not contest what Lord Chatfield says. My comment on consultation and agreement between Cabinet and Naval Staff applies only to the preliminary stages of their discussions. The break took place later. And, during these preliminary stages, both Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Alexander paid tribute to the Admiralty's helpful co-operation, the latter commenting on the concessions the Naval Staff had made.

though this involved risk, it was a risk we should take as a means to and in the hope of getting agreement to reduce from all other Powers at the conference.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Snowden, was more outspoken. He argued that if all preparations for disarmament were, in fact, to lead to a proposed increase of expenditure on Britain's part, then public opinion abroad and at home would be shocked to a degree that would condemn the conference to failure. 'Lloyd George, I know' he wrote, 'is feverishly waiting for just this opportunity, and our own people will be driven into revolt. It would be better to propose a big reduction we might not get than to submit what is in effect a big increase'.⁽⁸⁵⁾

These differences of view were never bridged. The Cabinet decided to adopt, for the forthcoming conference, proposals to prolong the battleship building holiday until after a further conference in 1935, and to ask for an all-round reduction in battleship requirements. They further took the Treasury rather than the Admiralty view on the subject of cruisers, admittedly on political grounds.⁽⁸⁶⁾

As proof of political goodwill, the 1930 Naval Estimates were reduced by cutting out two cruisers, four destroyers and three submarines in face of a further warning by the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Charles Madden, of the danger this would involve to national and imperial security.⁽⁸⁷⁾ These cuts led to questions in the House of Commons. In reply the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Alexander, claimed that the cuts had been made only after the most thorough examination of naval needs and of economy, and that the Government was satisfied that the provision they had made was 'adequate'.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Pressed on the same subject a week later he said that by 'adequate', he meant adequate for all naval requirements for the period the Government hoped to cover as a result of the forthcoming conference.⁽⁸⁹⁾ The Prime Minister, in reply to a question from Mr. Baldwin, now Leader of the Opposition, said that the basis of the Government's calculations of naval strength was the security afforded by the Kellogg/Briand Pact and the consequent reduced risk of war.⁽⁹⁰⁾

It was on this basis that the British delegation went to the London Naval Conference in 1930.⁽⁹¹⁾ And it should be realised that they went there knowing that the Dominions were substantially in agreement with the Cabinet's proposals.⁽⁹²⁾ On the other hand, even more than in 1921-22 the Admiralty disapproved, not so much of the general aim of disarmament, as of the particular sacrifices Britain was offering in order to make the achievement of that aim possible.

The work of the conference ended with a Treaty signed on 22nd April 1930. Because of disagreements between France and Italy, arising out of the former's claim of absolute need and the latter's claim to equality, the treaty was divided into two parts, one which

all five Powers signed, the other confined to the United States, Britain and Japan. All the Powers agreed not to lay down those replacement capital ships, during the years 1931-36, to which they were entitled under the terms of the Washington Treaty. The three major Powers also agreed to scrap, by 1933, the further vessels of this class already promised for scrap by 1936. There was also general agreement on certain restrictions in submarine warfare.

The three major Powers further agreed to limitations in other classes of vessels as shown in the following table—

| | <i>British Empire tons</i> | <i>U.S.A. tons</i> | <i>Japan tons</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| (i) 8-inch cruisers | 146,800 | 180,000 | 108,400 |
| (ii) 6-inch cruisers | 192,200 | 143,500 | 100,450 |
| (iii) Destroyers | 150,000 | 150,000 | 105,500 |
| (iv) Submarines | 52,700 | 52,700 | 52,700 ⁽⁹³⁾ |

These figures represented a considerable revision, and for the worse, of the Royal Navy's earlier and of its more recent demands. The prolongation of the battleship building holiday was the prolongation of a condition thought to bear more heavily on Britain than on the other Powers. The cruiser total was acceptable only in an improving world situation. The total destroyer tonnage of 150,000 tons, 50,000 tons below the minimum figure originally postulated by the Labour Government before the conference began, was acceptable for the Admiralty only if France and Italy resolved their disagreements sufficiently to accept the provisions of the London treaty for destroyers and submarines as well as for capital ships. When the conference ended there was no sign of such an advance being made. And the seriousness of this becomes all the more apparent when it is remembered that the maintenance of sea communications was described by the Chiefs of Staff in 1929 as 'the first principle of the system of imperial defence'.⁽⁹⁴⁾

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PART I

CHAPTER II

LOCARNO: THE OPERATION OF THE TEN YEAR RULE, 1920-28

1. *The Locarno Pact, 1925*

BY THE Treaty of Versailles France, together with the other countries of western Europe, was given three specific guarantees against aggression from a revived Germany, in addition to the general system of security which, it was hoped, would grow on the framework of the League of Nations. Those three specific items were the reduction of the German Army to a maximum of 100,000 men; the detailed limitation of armaments to treaty scale; and the demilitarisation of the Rhineland zone.

For generations France had looked upon the Rhine as her 'natural' frontier. In the seventeenth century and again during the time of the Revolution and Napoleon, the river had formed the natural limit to the expansionist schemes of the then greatest power in Europe. Long before 1918, however, the balance of power in Europe had changed. By 1918, therefore, France saw in the Rhine her natural forward line of defence against a new united and expansionist Germany whose power would always be greater than her own, and whose armies had twice crossed her eastern frontier in less than fifty years. For the French negotiators at the Peace Conference of Paris, the recovery of Alsace Lorraine was not enough. They considered that it was necessary for the military security of France to prevent German armies from once more debouching across the Rhine into the open plains of north western Europe. Only physical occupation of the river line itself could, as the French saw it, guarantee that protective frontier and all that it stood for. 'There is no English or American help', argued Marshal Foch, 'which can be strong enough and which can arrive in sufficient time to prevent the disaster in the plains of the north, preserve France from a complete defeat, or, if she wants to spare her armies from this, to free her from the necessity of drawing them back behind the Somme or the Seine or the Loire in order to await the help of her allies. The Rhine remains, therefore, today the barrier which is indispensable to the safety of the Nations of western Europe . . .'⁽¹⁾

The French therefore began this particular part of the peace negotiations with the two demands. First, that Germany should be denied all military access to the left bank of the Rhine and that integrated Allied forces should remain in permanent military occupation of that bank. Second, that German territory west of the Rhine should be formed into semi-autonomous political units with strong inducements to link their future fortunes to those of France and the Low Countries. The essential point in the plan was Allied occupation of the Rhine which was to become the 'common barrier of security necessary to the League of democratic nations'. On this a long controversy developed.

The American and British Governments objected to the French plan on several grounds. They saw in the proposals for permanent military occupation and, even more, in the attempt to detach part of Germany, likely causes of major political problems in the future. They already envisaged the ultimate reincorporation of a sovereign Germany into the comity of European nations. How could that possibly be achieved with a divided Germany and one occupied by Allied armies? Secondly, both Governments were under strong domestic pressure to demobilise. Armies of occupation would make full demobilisation impossible. Further, France should see her own future security within the League of Nations and not in the military occupation and dismemberment of Germany. To all this the French answered that their problem was primarily a military one which could be solved only by military measures; since they did not believe that Germany could be permanently disarmed, adequate guarantees of security must be found elsewhere. 'And next time, remember, the Germans will make no mistake', said Foch. 'They will break through into northern France and will seize the Channel Ports as a base of operations against England'.

The terms ultimately embodied in the Peace Treaty were a compromise between the French point of view and those of France's allies. As in so much of what happened later on, the task was to find some solution which, while giving to the French the security they might reasonably ask for, would not entail impossible political and military conditions for any other country. In the first place, by Articles 428-431, the German territory to the west of the Rhine, together with bridgeheads on the east bank, was to be occupied for a period of fifteen years, i.e. until January 1935. Second, Articles 42-44 provided for the permanent demilitarisation of German territory on the left bank of the Rhine and of a stretch 50 kilometres broad on the right bank.

The United States and Great Britain had, as we have seen, been opposed to anything but a temporary occupation of the Rhineland, mostly because of their fears that France would use the opportunity

of a long-term occupation for creating difficulties within the occupied area. France, on the other hand, had withdrawn her original demand for a permanent occupation of the Rhine only in return for the promise of Treaties of Guarantee by both the United States and Great Britain, by which the latter Powers would be bound to come immediately to the assistance of France in the event of any unprovoked act of aggression against her by Germany. In fact, those Treaties of Guarantee were not ratified by the United States Senate or by Parliament. From the beginning, therefore, France lacked what she desired most in order to preserve her security against a revived Germany. One sign of this was the conclusion in February 1921 of a Franco-Polish Treaty.

It would be far from true, however, to say that the other European Powers were unaware of the vital need for security in the interests of all. There were negotiations for an Anglo-French pact in 1922, negotiations which, it is worth remembering, broke down at least partly because Britain refused to treat a violation by Germany of Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles—as distinct from a violation of the actual French frontier—as a *casus belli*. The proposed Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance, and the proposed Geneva Protocol of 1924, were further evidence that the problem of security had not been forgotten. The latter proposal was defeated largely because of the opposition of Britain and the Dominions who feared the threat posed by compulsory arbitration to domestic sovereignty. But out of the failure of the Geneva Protocol there grew fresh ideas which bore fruit in the Locarno Agreements of 1925. Moreover, during discussions in the Cabinet and its committees, both on the Geneva Protocol and on Locarno, there emerged certain views about Britain's relation to the problem of security in continental Europe which are worth analysing here.

For generations it has been a basic principle of British strategy that the continental Channel ports and their hinterland should not be allowed to fall under the control of a powerful enemy of this country. And this, normally, was a prominent feature of the broader and no less long-established British aim to preserve the Balance of Power in western Europe. The reasons are obvious. A land-power which controlled the French Atlantic coast and the ports of northern France and the Netherlands could both threaten Britain's shipping in the Channel and the Straits and also an invasion of Britain herself.⁽²⁾ 'All our greatest wars have been fought,' said the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Austen Chamberlain, in the House of Commons in March 1925, 'to prevent one great military Power dominating Europe, and at the same time dominating the coasts of the Channel and the ports of the Low Countries. . . . The issue is one which affects our security.'⁽³⁾

But though the central strategic aim remained constant, there have been divergencies of view about the best method of attaining it. On the one hand some have maintained that, even though Britain's enemies were continental ones, her own war effort should be restricted to the achievement of maritime supremacy and the exploitation of colonial gains, while paying for mercenaries or subsidising allies on the Continent. Others have argued that Britain's security demanded that she should fight on the Continent herself.

It is perfectly true, as Sir Julian Corbett pointed out, that command of the sea has often enabled Britain to fight limited 'war by contingent' with great success.⁽⁴⁾ In other words, with control of the sea she has been able to land her small armies when and where she chose on the periphery of Europe, making her choice to suit herself and to harm her enemies most. Of this method the Peninsular War is probably the most famous example. On the other hand, it is also true that such peripheral attacks, unless concerted with the major land efforts of Allies, have normally failed to do serious harm to a powerful enemy. And if such allies have not been available, or if their efforts have not been adequate, Britain has sometimes felt compelled to intervene on land in a major way herself. In other words, British experience suggests, certainly for many people, 'that sea power, unless reinforced by land forces, [is] impotent against a strong land-power.'⁽⁵⁾

These matters were much discussed before, during and after the First World War. Unfortunately, however, the very nature of most of the fighting in that war tended afterwards to distort debate about the correctness or otherwise of the strategic principles on which the campaigns of the war had been planned. The slaughter and filth of the trenches left a legacy of passionate hope, indeed belief, that such a war would never be fought again; while the more reasoned arguments of those who disagreed with the Western strategy which the Allies had followed seemed only to justify that hope. For while those latter critics did not, on the whole, deny the need for a large British army in the years 1914-18, they did claim that with a different strategic approach, viz. with much less emphasis on a massive land confrontation on the Western front and more use of land operations in areas opened up by Allied command of the sea, the defeat of the Central Powers could have been achieved at the cost of many fewer lives. The 'Easterner' school of thought may or may not have been right. What is undeniable is that their arguments, reinforced as they were by the emotions of all who loathed the blood-letting of the trenches, tended to obscure how much and for how long Britain's security had been intimately related to the security of western Europe.

In presenting their views on the strategic implications of the

proposed Geneva Protocol in 1924 the Chiefs of Staff reached a substantial measure of agreement.* In the first place they condemned the Protocol unreservedly on several grounds. They denied that a 'threat of aggression' could be exactly defined; they argued that the contingencies envisaged applied far more to continental than to imperial risks; and they thought that the unspecified commitments accepted by signatories would certainly, in the case of Great Britain, demand an increase of armaments.⁽⁶⁾ But the issue of security was also dealt with constructively. In an earlier memorandum of 1924 the General Staff had argued that the security of France, in so far as it legitimately concerned Britain, could be achieved either through a strong and efficient League of Nations or through a military pact or alliance between France and Britain.⁽⁷⁾ The first solution was dismissed as 'visionary and remote'. On the second, it was argued that 'from the purely military point of view the General Staff consider that a military pact with France, provided it is kept strictly within limits, would have certain definite advantages'. The limits the General Staff had in mind were not concerned with such things as the definition of 'flagrant violation' or 'aggression' behind which action could be avoided as it was in 1936. They were concerned to avoid any commitment to France involving a specific number of troops or the withdrawal of forces engaged in Imperial policing during peace. They assumed, however, that any pact to be worthwhile, 'cannot be limited to one or more of the fighting services. Should the future unfortunately bring occasion for putting the pact into force, Great Britain must enter all her forces available at the moment and must be prepared to expand these forces as necessary to meet the needs of the case'. And they expressly excluded any 'commitment in regard to Germany's eastern frontier, or, indeed, any commitment except in regard to the defence of France and Belgium'.

In concluding this appreciation the General Staff wrote:

'In summing up the whole study of French and Belgian Security, the General Staff, looking as far ahead as they dare, see the balance of manpower steadily increasing in favour of Germany, but only usable for purposes of aggression if supplemented by adequate armaments. The future security of France and Belgium lies in the denial to Germany of the capacity to provide and maintain armaments on the scale necessary for the prosecution of a great war. This implies a policy based on a firm hold on Lorraine and, for the present, the Saar, and on the firm maintenance of Articles 42 to 44 and 429 of the Treaty.'

* The chief purposes of the Geneva Protocol were to outlaw 'aggressive war' and to provide for compulsory arbitration to determine whether 'aggression' had occurred.

'For the implementing of this policy, which is purely defensive and is based on the Treaty of Versailles, France and Belgium require the moral and material support of Great Britain. The anxiety of France in regard to this support can only be allayed by a definite alliance. There is no doubt in the opinion of the General Staff that such an alliance would make for peace.'⁽⁸⁾

The Naval Staff were in complete agreement with these views, not least with the argument that a pact, on the lines being discussed, was better than the Geneva Protocol. Further they stressed that—

'The point of primary naval interest is that the Pact would ensure the security of the Channel ports. This was, in this sphere, our main preoccupation in the late war, and in any future war our interest in their security will be even greater on account of the great development of artillery, aircraft and other forms of offensive action.'⁽⁹⁾

The Air Staff, at least initially, were more doubtful, apparently as much impressed by the potential danger of air attack by France as by Germany. But by the end of 1924 they, too, had come down in favour of a pact although they wanted to include Germany if possible. They clearly expected a revival of German military power and were aware of the need to insure against it, arguing that a pact, together with the continued demilitarisation of the Rhineland, would greatly reduce the danger of a German attack upon France or Belgium and thus upon Britain. It was essential in their view that Belgium should be included.⁽¹⁰⁾

Thus, by the time the British Government were prepared to reject the Geneva Protocol in early 1925 they were also primed with substantially agreed advice from the three Services that a military pact with France, to achieve French and Belgian and hence British security, was an acceptable, indeed a desirable alternative. These views were, from a strategic point of view, strongly supported by a Foreign Office memorandum prepared in February 1925. That memorandum laid down as conditions for Britain's security:

'(a) That no single Power shall be in a position to occupy or to dominate all the Channel and the North Sea Ports'. . . .

'(c) That no Third Power at war with France or Belgium should be allowed to invade those countries so as to threaten the *status quo* of the Channel Ports, or of such French and Belgian territory as would expose Great Britain to aerial invasion.'

'(d) That it is consequently a necessity of British, and therefore of Imperial defence to reach some understanding with France and Belgium which may entail a guarantee on our part that these territories shall not fall into other hands.'⁽¹¹⁾

On the basis of all this the General Staff could properly have claimed to be speaking with the support of the other Services and of the Foreign Office when they wrote, a few days later:

'The question at issue is clearly not well understood by the majority of the British public.'

'For us it is only *incidentally* a question of French security; essentially it is a matter of British security. . . .'

'The true strategic frontier of Great Britain is the Rhine; her security depends entirely upon the present frontiers of France, Belgium and Holland being maintained and remaining in friendly hands. The great guiding principle of the German General Staff in making plans for a future war will be, as in the last war, to try to defeat her enemies in detail. Any line of policy which permitted Germany (with or without allies) first to swallow up France, and then to deal with Great Britain would be fatal strategically.'⁽¹²⁾

Even before the Geneva Protocol was finally rejected, the British Ambassador in Berlin had told Sir Austen Chamberlain that Stresemann, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, had views about security which involved the inclusion of Germany in a pact between his own country, France, Belgium and the United Kingdom to guarantee the frontiers of France and Belgium;* and from the beginning neither the C.I.D. nor the Chiefs of Staff did anything but support the inclusion of Germany in an agreement previously considered only in relation to France, Belgium and Britain.⁽¹⁴⁾ Indeed, as we have seen, it had always been the Air Staff view that the pact would be complete only if Germany were in. Therefore no new major strategic appreciation was drawn up for the guidance of the British Government once diplomatic negotiations for a Four Power Pact leading to Locarno eventually got under way in the spring of 1925. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, supporting the extension of the negotiations to Germany, summed up the military point of view when he argued that the additional commitment to support Germany against France was unlikely to be a serious obligation in practice since the mere fact of a possible Anglo-German alignment would put French aggression out of court. Moreover such a pact would help to put continental areas of dis-

* On 25th January 1925 Stresemann sent a secret despatch to the British Foreign Office. One Foreign Office official, commenting on this, wrote that 'it is to be hoped that the German idea as a whole . . . will be carefully examined . . . previous German suggestions on the settlement of security . . . have never been given the consideration they undoubtedly deserve'.⁽¹³⁾ It seems that at any rate one of Stresemann's reasons for taking this initiative was to forestall a possible tripartite pact between France, Belgium and Britain directed against Germany.

turbance as far as possible from Britain's shores, and this he regarded as a 'fundamental strategic doctrine of the General Staff'.⁽¹⁵⁾

On 16th October 1925 the Locarno Treaties were signed.* They included certain agreements about Germany's eastern frontiers in which Britain was not involved. But the first agreement signed was a treaty of mutual guarantee of the Franco-German and Belgo-German frontiers between Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy.⁽¹⁶⁾

The first two articles of the treaty ran as follows:

Article 1

'The high contracting parties collectively and severally guarantee, in the manner provided in the following articles, the maintenance of the territorial *status quo* resulting from the frontiers between Germany and Belgium between Germany and France and the inviolability of the said frontiers as fixed by or in pursuance of the Treaty of Peace signed at Versailles on the 28th June 1919, and also the observance of the stipulations of articles 42 and 43 of the said treaty concerning the demilitarised zone.'

Article 2

'Germany and Belgium, and also Germany and France, mutually undertake that they will in no case attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other.

This stipulation shall not, however, apply in the case of:

1. The exercise of the right of legitimate defence, that is to say, resistance to a violation of the undertaking contained in the previous paragraph or to a flagrant breach of articles 42 or 43 of the said Treaty of Versailles, if such breach constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and by reason of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarised zone immediate action is necessary.'

Article 4 provided that, in the event of alleged violation of the above two earlier articles, or of articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles, any one of the high contracting parties could bring the matter to the attention of the Council of the League which in turn would notify those parties of its findings. Once a violation of the articles in question was notified each of the high contracting parties bound itself to come to the help of the aggrieved party, 'as soon as the said Power has been able to satisfy itself that this violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression'.

A closer look at the terms of the Treaty, particularly in the light of the discussions which preceded the signing of it, reveals possible ambiguities which were to some extent foreseen at the time and which

* The certified copy of the Treaty was signed in London on 1st December 1925.

certainly affected the actions of the signatory Powers later. For example, what was a 'flagrant violation'? Again, to whom did the words 'the said Power', as quoted above, refer? To the aggrieved party or to the guarantor Power coming to its help? There can be no doubt that the British Government accepted the second meaning, for otherwise its traditional freedom of action—and there was no intention of sacrificing that freedom—would have been impaired. Contemporary sources in fact suggest that, for the British negotiators, the guarantee Britain gave would come into operation only in the event of hostilities and that a 'flagrant violation' meant an actual attack on French and Belgian territory and not simply any breach of the treaty. Indeed, Chamberlain told the C.I.D. that he regarded British liabilities as reduced not extended by Locarno.⁽¹⁷⁾ In other words, if German troops entered the demilitarised zone, but neither crossed the French frontier nor entered the zone with 'the clear intention of making war', then France was not automatically entitled to take immediate military action or to expect the other high contracting parties to Locarno to do so.⁽¹⁸⁾ The guarantors, not the aggrieved party, would decide whether any so-called violation implied an intention to go to war except in the case of a direct attack across a frontier. For the French, however, this was not good enough. Their view was that 'the guarantor does not decide automatically and unilaterally who is the aggressor. The aggressor defines himself by the very fact that instead of submitting to a pacific solution, he resorts to arms, or violates either the frontier or, in the case of the Rhineland, the demilitarised zone'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Now, as later, the French wanted automatic guarantees which the British refused to give; and that gap was never bridged. One result of this difference of view became clear some years later when it exercised a harmful effect on negotiations which the then British government clearly wanted to bring to success. Commenting on the difficulty of bringing French and German negotiators to terms at the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1933 a Foreign Office representative wrote—

'The reason why Locarno has not been more successful in inducing French disarmament is because its terms as regards British intervention are not sufficiently precise and because whilst France does not doubt that Great Britain would ultimately come to her aid, she fears that there would be several weeks during which she would be left alone to defend "her soil"'.⁽²⁰⁾

The events of March 1936 were to prove those fears to be only too well founded.

Sir Austen Chamberlain later declared that Locarno marked 'the real dividing line between the years of war and the years of peace'.⁽²¹⁾

and there can be no doubt that those who hoped for peace saw this pact as a milestone on the way to the promised land. But there were, unfortunately, too many in Britain who allowed the pact's attractions as a gesture of friendship to Germany and reassurance to France to obscure the fact that such gestures might prove worthless, and even dangerous, unless Locarno was also seen as a positive move in the construction of a new European security system. In other words, while it was understandable to regard Locarno as a step on the way to peace, it was also important to remember that it implied a concept of British interests which, in the past, had more than once been protected only by war.

2. *Service Programmes and the Ten Year Rule, 1920-28*

It is time to turn back to the history of the three individual Services during the nineteen-twenties, and to do so with particular reference to the Ten Year Rule. It will be remembered that that Rule had been originally established in 1919 as a brief general guide to the formulation of Service Estimates and not as a set of detailed instructions. The details gradually became apparent during the succeeding years as the functions and size of each Service came up for consideration against the changing background of the broad international scene.

First the Royal Air Force.⁽²²⁾ The heavy losses suffered in London as a result of German air raids in June and July 1917 persuaded the War Cabinet to set up a small Committee, under the Chairmanship of General Smuts, to consider and report upon the joint problems of air defence and the organisation needed to deal with it.* The Committee issued two reports in August of that year. The second report, which might well be regarded as the original charter of the Royal Air Force, drew attention to the great potentialities of air power and recommended the creation of a separate air service. 'As far as can at present be foreseen', ran this report, 'there is apparently no limit to the scale of its future independent war use. And the day may not be far off when aerial operations with their devastation of enemy lands and destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principal operations of war, to which the older forms of military and naval operations may become secondary and subordinate'.⁽²³⁾

Largely as a result of these reports a separate Air Council and Air Ministry were set up in January 1918. Three months later the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service were combined to form the Royal Air Force. Unfortunately for the new Service,

* Committee on Air Organisation and Home Defence against Air Raids.

however, the war ended too soon after this for either the strategic possibilities or the internal organisation of the R.A.F. to become fully established. Both the Army and the Navy fought to take back components of the Air Force under their own control.⁽²⁴⁾ In March 1922, however, the Government at last stated its intention to retain a separate Air Force, an intention which was finally confirmed following upon the report of the Salisbury Committee on National and Imperial Defence in the summer of next year.⁽²⁵⁾

Behind disagreements about organisation lay basic differences of view about strategic functions. The proper place of the Royal Air Force in the general scheme of national and imperial defence was understandably a subject of controversy in the immediate post war years.* The First World War had been for the Royal Air Force a period of promise rather than fulfilment, particularly in so far as its own independent or strategic bombing operations were concerned: yet the convictions of its leading spokesmen made them demand that the promise should be recognised and embodied in formal terms, giving to the Royal Air Force specific responsibilities within overall plans for National and Imperial Defence. On the one hand there were the general arguments used by Sir Hugh Trenchard that the coming of air power was too important a military development to be merely taken for granted; its potential should be thoroughly examined in relation both to the general problems of defence and to the existing and likely future functions of the Navy and Army.⁽²⁶⁾ On the other hand there were current practical developments which could be of considerable importance in the future and which, although well known to most airmen and to many politicians, were largely unknown to the general public. In some remote areas the Royal Air Force was taking over work previously done by the Army and doing so at much less cost and, from some points of view, more effectively. The 'Mad Mullah' episode in British Somaliland in early 1920 was one such occasion; by 1922 the Royal Air Force was engaged in similar work in Iraq.⁽²⁷⁾ With ammunition of this kind at their disposal airmen were not going to let themselves be absorbed into the Navy and the Army without a fight.

It was partly demands of this sort which led the C.I.D. to recommend that the Cabinet should set up a Battleship Sub-Committee in December 1920.[†]⁽²⁸⁾ Although worsted on this occasion in practical results even if not in argument, the Royal Air Force had more success a little later on. In the spring of 1922 the Government, advised by Mr. Balfour in this matter, accepted the principle that future responsibility for the defence of Britain against air attack

* See above, p. 9.

† See above, p. 12.

should be transferred from the War Office to the Air Ministry. 'Only the Air Force', wrote Mr. Balfour, 'can protect us from invasion by air. Even anti-aircraft guns, however numerous and however well-directed, will never prevent invading aeroplanes working their will upon a city like London. Aircraft must in such cases be met by aircraft'.⁽²⁹⁾ It was this decision which led to the compromise whereby the War Office continued to provide and man the guns and searchlights for the defence of Britain against air attack, but did so on principles governing their deployment agreed upon with the Air Ministry. Further, an air officer was to be placed in operational control of the entire system of air defence, aircraft as well as ground defences.⁽³⁰⁾

While engaged in their enquiry into the proper allocation of duties among the three Services in relation to an attack upon these islands, Mr. Balfour and others of those working with him became impressed with the weakness of Britain's air resources in comparison with those of the only Power at that time able to attack her from the air—namely France.⁽³¹⁾ Rapid post-war demobilisation had been particularly hard on the Royal Air Force. At the end of the First World War Britain was the leading air power. In 1919, however, with the Air Estimates down to £15 million, the Air Staff decided that the only course open to them was 'to reduce service squadrons to the minimum considered essential for our garrisons overseas, with a very small number in the United Kingdom as a reserve, and to concentrate the whole of the remainder of our resources on perfecting the training of officers and men'. This, in practice, meant that overseas garrisons were to be reduced to eighteen squadrons, while the home-based air force—apart from six or seven squadrons for co-operation work with the Army and the Navy—was to be established at no more than four squadrons.⁽³²⁾ Moreover, it was not until the summer of 1921 that the first three of those four squadrons were actually formed.

In other words, by 1920 demobilisation had gone so far that the total resources of the Royal Air Force were barely enough to meet its commitments, and those only on a very limited scale, for direct support to the Army and the Navy. Its resources in fighters and bombers for independent air operations were virtually negligible. Yet there were many, and not only airmen, who believed both that an independent or strategic air force was a war winning weapon of the future, and also that the only effective reply to an attack by bombers was a counter-offensive of the same sort.

Comparing the air power standards of France and Britain in October 1921 Mr. Balfour pointed out to the C.I.D. that the French were overwhelmingly superior in this respect. The French had at present, he said, forty-seven independent air squadrons, whereas

we had only three. He viewed the situation with profound alarm. The fact was that at this moment we were incapable of resisting an aerial invasion by the French.⁽³³⁾ A month later the C.I.D. decided, in November 1921, to set up a sub-committee 'to go fully into the question of the vulnerability of the British Isles to air attack and the measures needed to provide for meeting such attack'. Arguments could be and were levelled against the kind of developments such an enquiry might lead to. The Admiralty took the view that, so long as Britain controlled the Narrow Seas, then an attack on this country by France—unlikely in any case—could soon be stopped by naval action against the French coast.⁽³⁴⁾ Others were opposed to any enquiry which postulated France as a possible enemy on the ground that, if it became known, relations with France would be prejudiced.⁽³⁵⁾ But, on the other hand, if the Government was coming to the view, as we have seen it certainly was, that only the Royal Air Force could successfully defend the country against air attack, then it was essential to enquire into what sort of attack might be delivered and with what sort of air force it should be met.

When the C.I.D. sub-committee on the Continental Air Menace reported in the summer of 1922 it recommended that:

- '(a) The establishment of the Air Force at home should be increased in order to enable an offensive organisation to be built up, and
- (b) The organisation of a zone of defence should be proceeded with.'⁽³⁶⁾

The Air Ministry then quickly got to work on the details necessary to implement these recommendations. And in August 1922 the Government approved a scheme for a metropolitan air force of 500 aircraft. This was intended specifically for home defence, and its formation was to begin in the following November. Moreover, this decision was in no way to prejudice the further expansion of the Royal Air Force if this should later be deemed necessary in the interests of national security.⁽³⁷⁾

Even when this programme was decided on neither the Government nor the Air Staff was unaware of its limitations. The striking force envisaged in it was little more than half the size of the comparable element of the French 'Division Aérienne'. Moreover, it was anticipated that the French would expand their own bomber force in the near future. In 1922, however, the arguments for proceeding slowly were given most weight. By early 1923 the outlook had changed.

The French occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923 led to a temporary but serious worsening of Anglo-French relations. It was

in this atmosphere that, in March, the Conservative Government of Mr. Bonar Law appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Lord Salisbury to enquire into a wide range of problems of national and imperial defence. The Salisbury Committee was instructed to enquire, among other things, into 'the standard to be aimed at for defining the strength of the Air Force for purposes of Home and Imperial defence', and on 12th June, in an interim report, the committee produced its views on this particular subject.⁽³⁸⁾ Commenting on the 'menacing position' of disparity in air power as between Britain and France, the report declared that:

'In addition to meeting the essential air power requirements of the Navy, Army, Indian and overseas commitments . . . , British air power must include a Home Defence Air Force of sufficient strength adequately to protect us against air attack by the strongest air force within striking distance of this country.'⁽³⁹⁾

In their subsequent discussions on the subject the Cabinet took as the standard to be aimed at the attainment and maintenance of approximate numerical equality with the French air striking force,⁽⁴⁰⁾ and announced their decision, on 26th June in the House of Commons, to develop a Home Defence Force 'of 52 squadrons to be created with as little delay as possible'.⁽⁴¹⁾ This new scheme was to provide, 'in the first instance' a metropolitan first line establishment of 394 bombers and 204 fighters. And the Air Ministry aimed to complete it in five years, i.e. by 1928-29.⁽⁴²⁾

The 52 squadron scheme, and the high-level recommendations on which it was based, were of great significance in the history of the Royal Air Force. First, they embodied the principle that British defence policy should aim at a One-Power standard of strength in the air no less than on the sea. Second, they implied the principle of 'independent air power', i.e. of a substantial independent and unified Air Force equal in status with the Army and Navy, and granted its own distinct part in the general scheme of national defence.

By 1925 the scheme was well under way, and about half the fifty-two squadrons were formed. By that time also the international scene was one of apparently universal goodwill, symbolised by the conclusion of the Locarno Pact. At that point the Secretary of State for Air suggested that, both upon the ground of economy and also that of international understanding, the time was ripe for an attempt to agree with the French upon some measure of air disarmament comparable to what had been achieved for battleships earlier at Washington. And he asked that a Cabinet Committee should be set up to examine the problem of future air policy in the light of the

suggestions he had made.⁽⁴³⁾ Such a committee was appointed, under the chairmanship of Lord Birkenhead, and it reported back to the Cabinet at the end of November 1925.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The committee agreed with the Secretary of State for Air that Britain's current state of inferiority in relation to France, in Home Defence aircraft of 1:3 was 'disquieting and unsatisfactory'; air defence was essential and the 1923 scheme must remain the basis of it. On the other hand, the report went on:

'On a review of the international situation, we are of opinion that the risk of a war among the great powers of Europe is not a factor which at this time need be taken into account in deciding as to the rate at which the building up of the Air Force to the standard fixed by the previous Cabinet decisions is to be continued.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

On the strength of the review the committee therefore recommended not that the Government should try to get some agreed programme of air limitation with the French, but that Britain should simply postpone the date for the completion of her own fifty-two squadron scheme until 1935-36. This recommendation the Cabinet accepted.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Four years later, in 1929, in face of an even more urgent demand for economy, the second Labour administration further postponed the completion date of the fifty-two squadron scheme until 1938.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Thus the completion of the plans of 1923, the first substantial peace-time plans for a metropolitan air force for Britain, had, within the space of about five years, been subjected to a postponement of ten.

This virtual reaffirmation of the Ten Year Rule in the case of the Royal Air Force had also, in 1925, been independently applied to the Royal Navy. In November 1924, Mr. Winston Churchill, then Chancellor of the Exchequer in the second Baldwin administration, asked the Cabinet for guidance and help in his attempt to keep down and, if possible, to reduce expenditure in 1925-26. In discussing expenditure on the fighting Services Mr. Churchill suggested that current Navy plans for the development of Singapore, and for an increase in the cruiser programme, should be subjected to an enquiry 'as to the rate at which these projects could be undertaken consistently with our financial position and the desirability from a political point of view of avoiding any increase in expenditure on armaments in the forthcoming financial year'.⁽⁴⁸⁾ He further suggested that, in addition to a review of these plans, the C.I.D. should be asked to undertake a review of the defence situation of the Empire as a whole, and also to investigate the desirability and practicability of renewing the Ten Year Rule of August 1919.

Right at the start of this review the Foreign Secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain, made a detailed statement to the C.I.D. in which he set out the considered views of the Foreign Office on the political outlook in the Far East and the prospects of peace or war in that part of the world. The core of the Foreign Secretary's assessment was that he regarded the prospect of war in the Far East as very remote.

'I cannot conceive,' he said, 'of any circumstances in which, singlehanded, we are likely to go to war with Japan. I cannot conceive it possible that Japan, singlehanded, should seek a conflict with us. The only case in which I think Japan (which is an uneasy and rather restless Power, whose action is not always easy to predicate) might become dangerous is after a new regrouping of the European Powers.'

He then went on to conclude that since there was no foreseeable danger of war between Britain and Japan the former should do nothing specifically, in this context, in terms of competitive building of ships or bases, to disquiet the Japanese.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The crux of the discussions that followed, first in the Naval Programme Committee and then in the C.I.D. itself, was the desirability or otherwise of stationing a battle-fleet at Singapore. The Admiralty's plans had long been based on the assumption that a battle-fleet would regularly be stationed at Singapore when the base was completed; and the Naval Staff were shocked by Mr. Churchill's wish for more flexible fleet dispositions to avoid tying up at Singapore, to meet a problematical attack by an enemy main fleet, ships that might be better employed elsewhere. Mr. Churchill had warmly welcomed the Foreign Secretary's statement emphasising that 'there is no critical serious tension between us and Japan and that Anglo-Japanese relations are not in any way comparable in the slightest degree with what Anglo-German relations were in the ten years preceding the Great War'. And he then went on to draw some strategic conclusions relevant to the practical operation of the One-Power Standard. He criticised those who claimed that the implication of that Standard was that the Royal Navy should be strong enough at its average moment to meet the Japanese Navy at the latter's selected moment. Such an implication had been valid in the years before 1914 *vis-à-vis* Germany since that country then had the means to force Britain to a decisive naval battle within a few days. But the situation in 1925 was entirely different. Japan, and America too, were separated from Britain by vast tracts of ocean which meant that surprise attack on Britain herself was impossible and any attack would have to be conducted by the other Power at a crippling distance from its main bases. This further meant that any

country likely to be attacked would have plenty of time to prepare and need not fight until ready to do so. There was absolutely no danger of a sudden crisis, and all military, naval and air preparations should reflect that. It followed that there was no urgency about developing Singapore even though he, Mr. Churchill, agreed that it should be developed in time. He looked upon Singapore not as a base for offensive operations against Japan but as the main line of communications with Australia and, he stated 'I do not think in our lifetime or in that of our children you are going to see an attempt by Japan to invade and colonise Australia by force'.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Lord Beatty, Chief of Naval Staff, was not then asking for more than authority to proceed with limited plans. But, dubious of political dicta about the remoteness of war, he thought it unwise to rule out any extension of these plans for as long as ten years. And he was equally opposed to the Chancellor's next suggestion that there should be a comprehensive review of the defence situation every three years, after which, if no important change for the worse had developed, the 'no major war for ten years' period should start afresh.⁽⁵¹⁾

In trying to resolve these matters the Naval Programme Committee found that the naval standard against which the Admiralty were measuring Britain's needs was that of Japan. They therefore sought the guidance of the C.I.D. upon the possibility of a war between Britain and Japan in any future period with which it was necessary for them to concern themselves. The recommendation of the C.I.D. upon this subject,⁽⁵²⁾ subsequently accepted by the Cabinet, was that:

'The Committee accept the view of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs that, in existing circumstances, aggressive action against the British Empire on the part of Japan within the next ten years is not a contingency seriously to be apprehended.'

One practical result of this recommendation is evidence of the way in which the Ten Year Rule operated. Although the preliminary arrangements to establish docking facilities for the largest ships at Singapore and also the necessary fuel installations were to go ahead gradually as planned, it was decided that there was no necessity 'to make preparations involving additional expenditure for placing at Singapore, for a decisive battle in the Pacific, a British battle fleet with cruisers, flotillas and all ancillary vessels superior in strength, or at least equal, to the sea-going navy of Japan'.⁽⁵³⁾ The Chancellor of the Exchequer had won. Lord Beatty's position was safeguarded only by the provision that a review of the situation should be made annually and not triennially. Nor

was this the end of the matter for the Navy. For it was consideration of the Naval Estimates which, in 1928, provided the occasion for the enunciation of the Ten Year Rule in its final and most restrictive form.*

When the Ten Year Rule was first framed in 1919 it contained, as we have seen, a special statement that no Expeditionary Force would be required for a major war.† This must be taken to refer to the type of continental war Britain had been engaged in from 1914 to 1918, and to the kind of Army she had contributed to the Allied cause. Further, it implied that the main responsibilities of the Army envisaged in the foreseeable future were those of home security and Imperial defence. These points were made explicit by Cabinet instructions to the War Office early in 1922. It was then laid down that the War Office should not provide for the contingency of another major national war for the present, and that it should organise on the basis of capacity to mobilise at home for a minor war—i.e. for overseas commitments outside Europe—an expeditionary force of 1 cavalry and 5 infantry divisions, with 14 Territorial divisions in second line.⁽⁵⁴⁾

In passing, the main commitments and therefore the distribution of the British Army at this stage should be borne in mind. The largest and most important of these, overseas, was the British component of the Army in India—8 cavalry regiments, 45 infantry battalions, and 55 field batteries, a total of nearly 70,000 men. A further 37 battalions were also overseas, 27 of them located on the Rhine, in the Constantinople area and in Egypt. This left 53 battalions and 9 cavalry regiments at home.⁽⁵⁵⁾ In accordance with Cabinet instructions none of these forces was organised as a potential contribution to a major war in Europe. Providing the Cabinet with these details in 1923 Lord Derby, the Secretary of State for War, pointed out that Britain possessed no expeditionary force of any kind without mobilisation, and a force consisting only of one cavalry brigade and 2 infantry divisions after a mobilisation period of fifteen days. This force, it is true, was designed to be expanded to something more than double its size as stipulated in 1922; but the prospects of such an expansion were, for a variety of reasons, 'remote'.⁽⁵⁶⁾

It might have been supposed that Locarno, and the strategic appreciations which preceded it, would draw attention to Britain's military deficiencies and underline the need for her Government to think once more in terms of an expeditionary force which would enable the frontier guarantees to be backed, if necessary, by force. But this was not so. In their Annual Review for 1926 the Chiefs of

* See below, p. 58.

† See above, p. 3.

Staff went into this point in some detail. They quoted and did not contest the Foreign Office view that 'the more the nations of Europe became convinced of our readiness to fulfil our guarantee, (i.e. by the terms of Locarno) the less likelihood will there be that we shall be called upon to do so'. Nor did they deny that readiness would best be proved by declared intention in the form of the Service Estimates. But they then went on to argue first that there were, in fact, no specific military commitments involved in the Locarno guarantee and, second, that even had there been, it would be impossible to honour them because of the severe limitations imposed upon the Services. Their words are worth quoting at length:

'As is explained later, the size of the forces of the Crown maintained by Great Britain is governed by various conditions peculiar to each service, and is not arrived at by any calculation of the requirements of foreign policy, nor is it possible that they ever should be so calculated. Thus, though the Expeditionary Force, together with a limited number of Air Force Squadrons, constitute the only military instrument available for immediate use in Europe or elsewhere outside Imperial territory in support of foreign policy, they are so available only when the requirements of Imperial Defence permit.

It follows that, so far as commitments on the continent are concerned, the Services can only take note of them. No specific provision to meet them is practicable, other than the adoption of such measures of organisation, training and equipment as are essential to enable them to fight on the continent if required.

It is most necessary to realise that the military basis on which our foreign policy must ultimately rely for the liquidation of its continental commitments is the capacity of Great Britain primarily, and eventually, subject to Article 9 of the Locarno Treaty, of the Empire generally, to mobilise all their resources for war. The despatch of our small expeditionary forces to a continental theatre of war can never be more than a pledge of our readiness to fulfil our guarantees. The capacity to fulfil those guarantees will be assessed by the completeness of the framework for military expansion, and by our preparations for the industrial mobilisation necessary to keep a national army in the field. . . .

We . . . recommend that the Committee of Imperial Defence should adopt as a principle governing the whole of our defence policy that our initial contribution to any war arising out of Treaties with foreign Powers should be provided from whatever forces are necessary for our own security.'

Whether any foreign Power interested in Britain's ability to fulfil her treaty guarantees would lightly accept such a definition of

'ability' is open to doubt. But the Chiefs of Staff were not, at this point, concerned to emphasise the dangers of the limits of possible British intervention in a European war arising out of treaty guarantees. Quite the reverse. Their view was that the peaceful international situation in general, and the Locarno Treaty in particular, had 'immensely simplified' Britain's defence problem in Europe; and they therefore asked for the release of some resources hitherto devoted to these needs for the purposes of 'Imperial Defence proper'. 'It seems', they wrote, 'that we are now again sufficiently free from threat of attack at home to be at liberty to attend to the defence of our possessions overseas, and to make proper provision for the military commitments inherent in that defence'. In particular they wished to devote more men, money and material to the defence of the main line of communication from Britain, via the Mediterranean to Singapore and the Pacific. They therefore recommended savings on possible continental commitments by reducing the size of the Territorial Army, putting coast and anti-aircraft ground defences in Britain on a Territorial Army basis to relieve the Regular Army, and then making men and money so saved available for 'Imperial Defence proper'. Subsequent discussion of these views in the C.I.D. revealed some disagreement, particularly from Lord Balfour who once again emphasised the danger of air attack from France. But, broadly speaking, the order of priorities suggested by the Chiefs of Staff was accepted and approved.⁽⁵⁷⁾

The general arguments of this review, at least so far as they concerned Army preparations for a major or European war, were repeated by the Secretary of State for War a year later. In July 1927 Sir Laming Worthington-Evans submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet. In this he asked specifically for a renewal of the 1919 rule 'to cover ten years from the present date'. His reasons were financial ones.

'The constantly increasing pressure to reduce the estimates, the dwindling war stocks requiring replacement, the need for new mechanical devices and the continued default in payment of sums anticipated as appropriations-in-aid, combine to make it necessary to concentrate expenditure on the more immediate and pressing needs.'

In present circumstances the Secretary of State, like the Chiefs of Staff a year before, considered that those needs lay outside Europe.⁽⁵⁸⁾

A few days later the Cabinet gave this memorandum their careful consideration. After a great deal of discussion it was decided to adopt, as a formula controlling the scope and size of the Army Estimates:

'That it should be assumed . . . that the British Empire will not be engaged in an European War during the next ten years and that the immediate plans of the Army should be based upon preparedness for an extra-European War.'⁽⁵⁹⁾

3. *The Ten Year Rule in its Final Form, 1928*

Thus, by the summer of 1927 all three Services had been instructed, not only by the general directive of 1919, but also by subsequent individual directives, that they need not calculate on a major war for ten years. But there was some ambiguity in the position. The Navy and the Air Force, in particular, had had terminating dates actually specified for them and, to that extent, it was possible for them to argue that their approved plans for a possible major war should be complete by then. On the other hand, it is quite clear that the Foreign Office and, following the Foreign Office, the Treasury, looked upon the end of any ten-year period not as a deadline, but rather as the symbol of virtually unlimited optimism. No modest and quite honest expressions of inability exactly to foretell the distant future could alter the fact that ten years expressed the confidence that was felt in a world not merely settling to peace after war, but doing so in a way that was thought to promise long-term future stability. The Covenant of the League, the Washington Treaty, the Locarno Treaty and the Kellogg Pact were the main pillars in this edifice of hopefulness. In a report prepared early in 1928 the Foreign Secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain, used these words of the three Powers against whom, in a military sense, Britain could measure her strength:

'War with France, to whom good relations with ourselves mean so much, appears inconceivable. Japan has never been more peacefully inclined than at present, and the only thing that would arouse her would be a menace to her own interests in Manchuria. A direct quarrel with the United States may be regarded as something that neither side would contemplate . . . the Committee of Imperial Defence might safely assume that no great war was likely to occur during the next ten years.'⁽⁶⁰⁾

Eighteen months before, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had expressed similar views, but in more extreme form, about Japan in particular. Commenting on the Chiefs of Staff Review for 1926, with its emphasis on concentrating resources to protect Britain's route to and position in the Far East, the Chancellor said:

'When agreeing after the war in principle to the establishment of a base in Singapore, he had never imagined that that decision

would be used as a peg on which to hang far-reaching schemes of alarmist policy and consequential armament. He did not believe that there was any danger to be apprehended from Japan, and he was convinced that the picture of Japan going mad and attacking us had no sure foundation whatsoever. He could not conceive that any Power like Japan would put herself in the position of being exposed to prolonged hostilities with the strongest Power in the world, nor could he imagine what incentive could possibly move Japan to incur the lasting hostility of England and to run the risk of being regarded as a pariah by the League of Nations. If he had foreseen that the decision to develop a base at Singapore would be used as a gigantic excuse for building up armaments and that this country would then be invited to pour out money with a view to conducting war at the other end of the world, he would never have agreed to the development of this base.*⁽⁶¹⁾

In this situation it was to be expected either that at least one of the Services would quarrel with the Foreign Office and Treasury over their interpretation of the rule, or that the Treasury, in particular, would attempt to enforce its interpretation at some point in the annual preparation of the Estimates. This latter, in fact, happened in 1928.

In June of that year the Treasury, as so often before, criticised the scope and principles of current naval expenditure. Two criticisms were made. First that the Board of Admiralty, by virtue of the ruling of 1925,[†] 'regarded themselves as bound to be fully ready for a Great War by 1935'. This was declared to be out of harmony with repeated decisions of His Majesty's Government under which the 'ten years' period 'is renewed from year to year, and should now be regarded as running until 1938 at least'. Secondly, the Board of Admiralty were criticised for attempting to liquidate their current commitments by 1931, 'in order to be able to release funds for new construction after that date', i.e. when, by the Washington Treaty, replacement of battleships could begin. The relevant Treasury letter then went on:

'My Lords conclude, therefore, that by adapting policy more closely to the Government's general policy as regards preparations for a Great War, and by contenting themselves with a lesser degree of activity during the present period of calm in international relations, the Board of Admiralty should be able

* This statement tallied with views Mr. Churchill had expressed in C.I.D. discussions more than a year earlier; see above, p. 50.

[†] See above, p. 49.

to make substantial reductions in Navy Votes by a general reduction of reserve standards and by spreading commitments over a longer period.'

Mr. Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, submitted this correspondence to the Cabinet and added his own contribution. He recommended to his colleagues:

'that it should now be laid down as a standing assumption that at any given date there will be no major war for ten years from that date; and that this should rule unless or until, on the initiative of the Foreign Office or one of the Fighting Services or otherwise, it was decided to alter it.'⁽⁶²⁾

Thereupon these matters were submitted to the C.I.D. for its consideration.

The meeting of the Committee was an important one, presided over by the Prime Minister and reinforced by representatives from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. It soon became apparent that, whatever the interpretation in detail when applying the Ten Year Rule—and it was admitted that Departments might and probably would have differences of view—its general result would be to effect a reduction in the Estimates. Moreover, the Foreign Secretary, as on more than one occasion during the past few years, supported the views of the Chancellor of the Exchequer with an optimistic review of Britain's foreign relations which concluded with the words that 'if it were not for the present condition of Russia and the uncertainty as to future Soviet policy, he would be without any grave doubts that we could reckon on no war of any magnitude during the next ten years'.

Some voices were raised in opposition. Lord Balfour's view was that Britain's fighting forces were so small anyway that they could fulfil their responsibilities only by being maintained 'in the highest pitch of perfection'. Mr. Amery, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, observed that 'major projects such as replacement of ships, dockyards and the like' were bound to be adversely affected by the Chancellor's present suggestion, indeed by the Rule in any form. Unless a programme of heavy works was closely adhered to, Britain might find herself in the position of having a great number of partially completed major projects on hand at a time when events might necessitate their rapid completion. In such circumstances, not only would it become almost impossible to overtake arrears and complete the projects, but difficulties in maintaining peace would be accentuated. The First Sea Lord, Sir Charles Madden, argued that it would be impossible to hide the effects of such an important

Cabinet decision from the personnel of the Fleet, and efficiency would suffer as a consequence. But the Chancellor of the Exchequer had his way. The C.I.D. recommended to the Cabinet:

'That it should be assumed, for the purpose of framing the Estimates of the Fighting Services, that at any given date there will be no major war for ten years.'

They also recommended, however, that this assumption should be reviewed annually, while any Department on its own, and quite apart from the Cabinet or the C.I.D., had the duty to question the assumption at any time if circumstances rendered its continuation inadvisable.⁽⁶³⁾ A few days later the Cabinet confirmed these recommendations.⁽⁶⁴⁾

There are several points which should be made about the Cabinet's decision in 1928 since this is the form of the Ten Year Rule most commonly referred to, and also because the circumstances of the decision later led to some public controversy among several of those actively concerned at the time.⁽⁶⁵⁾ In the first place, there can be no doubt whatsoever that, in 1928 as on several occasions in previous years, the Cabinet and the C.I.D. decided to extend the application of the general rule of 1919 primarily under pressure from the Treasury. Mr. Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, therefore figures prominently—and quite properly so—in this particular application of Treasury control.

Secondly, it should be realised that there was not, in 1928 any more than on other similar occasions in the nineteen-twenties, a strong body of Ministerial opinion which opposed the Treasury's demands. There were dissenting voices. Of these the most outspoken at this period was probably that of Lord Balfour. Admiralty spokesmen, too, fought hard to defend their position. But Ministers as a whole followed the Chancellor and prominent among them was the Foreign Secretary. On all major occasions when an extension or particular application of the Rule was under debate the advice of the Foreign Office was taken. And, throughout Mr. Baldwin's administration of 1924-29, that advice was the same. The enemies of the past were still weak and unthreatening; others who, theoretically, might give trouble in the future, were either too beset with domestic problems to be dangerous abroad, or else were thought to be enough in sympathy with the internationalism of the period to prefer peaceful means of achieving their aims. On no occasion did the Foreign Office attempt to evade its responsibility for giving advice. But on no occasion in these years did the Foreign Secretary speak with an uncertain voice; except that, in 1928, Sir Austen Chamberlain reminded his colleagues both that it would be im-

possible for the Foreign Office to provide any guarantee in regard to the advice it gave, and also that similar advice from Foreign Secretaries in the past had sometimes proved wildly wrong.⁽⁶⁶⁾

To be fair to those who looked upon the international scene through rose-tinted spectacles in 1928, it should be admitted that detailed signs of future trouble were but a faint cloud upon the horizon. It is true that the Allies had given up their last check on Germany with the withdrawal of the Commission of Control in 1927, and that already Germany's leaders were planning a war organisation. But this information about Germany did not come to notice until after the Rule had been renewed in 1928; and, even when it was discussed in 1930, it was represented by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff not as a specific menace but rather as proof that the military spirit of the German nation was being kept alive and the German Army being made as efficient as possible. So far as Japan was concerned, claims that her aggressive intentions *vis-à-vis* Britain had already been spotted seem to refer to the crisis of 1932, and even then to be based upon unreliable evidence.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The unwisdom of 1928 lay not in blindness to specific threats but in the belief that methods of international consultation and action, as yet basically untested, were in fact capable of solving the problems of a world which had been shaken violently off balance by a major war and the subsequent peace treaty and which had, so far, given little evidence of regaining its equilibrium.

Finally, the Chiefs of Staff in 1928 were no more opposed to the reaffirmation of the Ten Year Rule than were Ministers. Earlier in 1928 the Chiefs of Staff had looked with favour upon a suggestion that in their coming Annual Review they should disclose the shortcomings and weaknesses of Imperial Defence which had resulted from the decisions of recent years.^{(68)*} This review was completed only a few days after the renewal of the Rule, and after months of compilation.⁽⁷⁰⁾ In the circumstances it might, therefore, have been expected that some trouble would have been taken to acquaint the C.I.D. with the contents of the review, even in draft form, before the Committee and later the Cabinet agreed to the Chancellor's request. In fact that was not done. And the explanation seems to lie in the Rule itself. The defence deficiencies disclosed by the Review of the Chiefs of Staff were so great that while they could be accepted only on the ground that there was no foreseeable threat to the calm of the international scene, yet they could be remedied only by an equally unforeseeable programme of expenditure. Since an assur-

* It was, perhaps, his own action at this stage which prompted Lord Hankey to claim, in 1948, that Ministers should have been aware, in 1928, of the dangers in the international situation and of the need to answer with adequate defence preparations.⁽⁶⁹⁾

ance of peace had been given, the Chiefs of Staff accepted, so long as existing international conditions prevailed, the continued postponement of defence preparations involved in readiness for a major war.

On the other hand, the Chiefs of Staff claimed that they were unwilling to see the postponement of measures essential to security to the point where it would be impossible, in a deteriorating situation, to make good the accumulated deficiencies.

'The intention of the Committee of Imperial Defence in adopting this resolution' they wrote 'we understand', is, as long as existing international conditions prevail, to postpone bringing our defensive arrangements (which as the Report shows are as a whole not at a high standard of preparedness) to that pitch of readiness for a major war which was aimed at in 1914 and the immediately preceding years. There is, however, no intention to rule out those developments of Imperial Defence which are essential to security, nor to allow their postponement or retardation to be carried to a point at which, in the event of a deterioration in the international situation, it would either be physically impossible to overtake the accumulation of deficiencies within a reasonable time, or at which the mere attempt to do so would arouse suspicion and endanger peace. . . .

'We feel bound, however, to impress on the Committee of Imperial Defence how great a responsibility this places on those charged with the day-to-day conduct of foreign affairs to warn the Committee of Imperial Defence of the first hint of a less satisfactory state of affairs, in order that the necessary adjustments in our defensive arrangements may be considered, the requisite preparation for which would require a period of some years to bring into effective operation.'⁽⁷¹⁾

This was an attempt, even if an understandable one, to get the best of both worlds. The Chiefs of Staff expressly refused to criticise the political assumptions on which the C.I.D. and the Cabinet based their opinions, thus hoping to avoid the charge of exceeding their proper function. But in doing so they, by implication, overestimated the speed at which a democratic government can change gear, particularly where expenditure on distasteful or unpopular purposes is concerned; and they also underestimated the extent to which Ministers (in this matter in complete accord with the public opinion of the period) had allowed their optimism about the international situation to be coloured by an idealistic standard which made hope, to some extent, a substitute for judgment. Moreover, the Chiefs of Staff appear to have accepted the view of the Chancellor of the Exchequer that while the ten-year basis should help to reduce

Service Estimates it 'would not in any way hamper the development of ideas but would check mass production until the situation demanded it'.⁽⁷²⁾ This, again, was surely wishful thinking. Development of ideas is itself, to some extent, a product of that sense of urgency which makes mass production acceptable. Moreover, as Mr. Churchill was himself later to admit, the transition from peacetime methods to the mass production of war demands a period of years, even with the extraordinary powers which a war-time government possesses.

The effects of the Ten Year Rule upon Britain's defence preparations in the first fifteen years of peace* are not altogether easy to estimate accurately in detail. When asking for the abandonment of the Rule in 1932 the Chiefs of Staff had much to say on these lines, and some of this will be examined later.† The psychological effects, perhaps in the long run the most important, are also the most difficult to assess. It is impossible to gauge the cumulative effect on public opinion and Service morale of such a period of confident assurance that there would be no major war for ten years. Some time later Sir Maurice Hankey, who was certainly in an excellent position to judge, claimed that the long continuance of the rule had created a fixed state of mind in the Government Departments most responsible for defence preparations from which recovery was inevitably slow. Even when the situation in the nineteen-thirties had become menacing, he stated, it took a long time for these Departments to realise the serious expenditure on armaments that had to be incurred.⁽⁷³⁾‡ But the result, though perhaps easy to state in general, is more difficult to prove in detail. Similarly, it is not possible to prove whether the First Sea Lord was right or wrong in claiming, in 1928, that if 'it were known in the Fleet that we were accepting a certainty of ten years' peace, a great deal of the incentive for the personnel afloat to maintain its efficiency would be recovered'.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Further, the 'complacent optimism in public opinion' about foreign affairs and national defence, of which the Chiefs of Staff complained in 1932,⁽⁷⁵⁾ was surely as much a cause as a consequence of the Ten Year Rule. And it was, as we have seen, a state of mind as true of Ministers as of the public as a whole. As an illustration of this the Cabinet, in December, 1925, rejected a recommendation from the C.I.D. for some public education in Air Raid Precautions because of the 'great advance in the pacification of Europe' which had resulted from Locarno,⁽⁷⁶⁾ in the view of the Cabinet all that was necessary was the

* i.e. down to the first Deficiency programme of 1933, see below, Chap. IV.

† See below, Chap. III.

‡ These opinions were really those of Sir Maurice Hankey rather than those of Mr. Baldwin to whom they appear to be attributed.

continuation of enquiries by such local bodies as water boards, gas and electrical authorities, and the police. And even when some cautious publicity was sanctioned in November 1932, since it was then realised that similar action had already been taken in France and Germany, this was done with every show of reluctance and with the proviso 'that such publicity will be gradual and will be carried out in such a manner as will preclude any possibility of unfortunate reactions or of our intentions being misinterpreted either in this country or abroad.'⁽⁷⁷⁾ Attitudes of mind of this sort were deep-rooted in Britain in the nineteen-twenties. The Ten Year Rule was one manifestation of them; and it probably strengthened the roots from which it grew.

Secondly, it is obvious that general financial stringency after an unprecedentedly costly war was bound to affect the Fighting Services in any case. It is impossible to estimate how much more money those Services might have had but for the Rule's existence. With the hindsight of later years the Chiefs of Staff complained in 1932 that, amid the 'colossal expenditure on development and unemployment' of the nineteen-twenties, they found 'it difficult to believe that the relatively modest sums required to correct the more glaring deficiencies in Imperial Defence could not have been found'.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Perhaps. But their predecessors at that time certainly did not say so. Indeed, they accepted the limitations imposed on them in 1928 with the comment that, otherwise, the burden of Imperial Defence 'would be well-nigh insupportable'.⁽⁷⁹⁾ One is left with the impression that, even had money been saved on the social services in the nineteen-twenties, there would not have been adequate pressure from any quarter to divert the savings so achieved to national defence. The most one can say is that, without the Rule, financial considerations would not have had behind them quite the same unanswerable argument against even urgent proposals.

It is possible, however, to judge the effect of the Ten Year Rule on a more factual basis in relation to some specific items. Perhaps the best illustration of all is the date of the plans for the development of Singapore. In 1925 the C.I.D., as we have seen, recommended that plans for docking facilities for the largest ships and for fuel oil installations at Singapore should be carried out, but that, in view of the fact that no war with Japan need be expected in the next ten years, no expenditure should be incurred to enable Singapore to harbour and refit a battle-fleet capable of independent action in the Pacific.⁽⁸⁰⁾ This decision was to be reviewed annually in the light of the current international situation, so that deteriorating conditions could be met by reasonably speedy revision of plans. In November 1928, however, and because of the new form of the Ten Year Rule which had been adopted earlier that year, the C.I.D. decided that

the annual review was no longer necessary.^{(81)*} At the Imperial Conference of 1930 it was further decided

‘that the present policy of the ultimate establishment of a defended naval base at Singapore should be maintained, and that the Jackson contract should be continued. It was, however, also recommended that, apart from the latter expenditure and such as will be required for the completion of the air base on the scale at present contemplated, the remaining expenditure, i.e. that required for completing the equipment of the docks and for defence works should be postponed for the next five years, when the matter could be again reviewed in the light of relevant conditions then prevailing.’⁽⁸²⁾

The Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand agreed to this decision, although reluctantly. The latter, Mr. Forbes, pointed out that professional advice over a period of years had been unanimous in regarding the Singapore Base as essential to action by the Navy to protect the territories, trade and shipping of the Empire in the Pacific. Moreover the documents from the Foreign Office which had reached the New Zealand Government during the last few years made him hesitate to share the confidence felt by some people in the sure maintenance of peace during the next ten years. He gave way simply because he appreciated the difficulties of the existing financial situation.⁽⁸³⁾

Other programmes of the three Services provide comparable examples of delays and deficiencies due to the same cause. This appears clearly from papers prepared by the three Service Departments before the issue of the crucial Chiefs of Staff Annual Review for 1932.† The then Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Frederick Field, for example, claimed that as a result of the Ten Year Rule there had been, since 1921, a serious delay in the rate of building up stocks of fuel and stores needed to enable even the much reduced post-war fleet to operate at full efficiency. While the inadequate preparations at Singapore were notably bad they were only typical. There were, in fact, no adequately defended ports in the Commonwealth. They all lacked the heavy guns other nations had by hundreds and which the Naval Staff considered essential against bombardment by warships. And these ports were as defenceless against air attack as against attack from the sea.⁽⁸⁴⁾

Again, in 1931 Britain’s total air strength overseas was 250 aircraft, 96 of which were in India. But air control and security duties in Iraq, Transjordan and Aden restricted the availability of

* See above, p. 51.

† See below, Chap. III, Section 3.

some 70 aircraft, thus leaving only 180 for other world wide purposes. This figure was to be compared with France's overseas total of 300, an Italian air force of 1,000 aircraft and a Japanese one of 430. Singapore's air garrison was well below strength, and the defence of Hong Kong might well depend upon an, at present, completely inadequate air arm. The completion of the 1923 home air defence programme had, as we have already seen, been seriously delayed. By 1931, of the 52 squadrons planned only 42 were in existence, and 13 of them were second-line non-regular units. Britain could muster only 400 first line machines against a French total of 990. Only half the never very adequate plan for the A./A. defence of London was complete, and the state of the rest of south-east England was even worse. Only one out of 12 A./A. batteries had been formed, and the existing 11 out of 20 planned search-light companies averaged only about half their establishment of personnel and a third of their lights.⁽⁸⁵⁾

The state of the Army was, perhaps worst of all. Field Marshal Sir George Milne, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, pointed out in 1931 that ten years earlier the military advisers of the Government had accepted the risk of reductions, even below the modest 1914 standard, in view of the Cabinet decision that a major war was unlikely for ten years. The result of this in 1931 was that the country could mobilise only 2 infantry divisions and 2 cavalry brigades in the first three months of war, compared with 6 infantry divisions and a cavalry division in three weeks in 1914. To make matters worse, stocks and reserves of war material varied considerably and were not properly balanced. 'The Army is pared to the bone', the Chief of the Imperial General Staff declared with some justification. And he added bitterly, 'the only reproach that has ever been levelled at us at Geneva is that we have disarmed too much, and that our army is so small that it is incapable of fulfilling our international obligations'.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The seriousness of much of this was mitigated if major war was, in fact, unlikely for ten years. But would any government really get that amount of warning? And when warning was given, would the Government, or the people, be willing to put matters right in the time available? An answer to these questions was to be given soon.

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PART I

CHAPTER III

THE CANCELLATION OF THE TEN YEAR RULE, 1929-32

1. *The Ten Year Rule in Doubt*

THE YEARS that followed the enunciation of the Ten Year Rule in its general and final form in 1928 were not years in which its application could be accepted unquestioningly. The major moves towards international agreement in those years were not ones of unqualified success. The London Naval Treaty, as we have seen, was much more limited in scope than its sponsors had originally planned; and subsequent negotiations between France and Italy, the two Powers which did not comply with all its provisions, were marked by bitterness that promised little hope of accommodation. The work of the Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference had also, and after five years of labour, produced only a limited measure of agreement in its draft disarmament Convention by the end of 1930. In both cases not merely was achievement limited; what had not been accomplished implied a threat to the little that had been won. The years from 1928 to 1933 were years of lessening hope, ending in a strong revival of fear.

The change of emphasis was, however, a gradual one. The assumption, as a basis for the Defence Estimates, that there would be no major war for ten years was confidently reaffirmed by the C.I.D. in 1929⁽¹⁾ and again in 1930.⁽²⁾ An important note of warning was, however, struck by the Chiefs of Staff in their annual review of Imperial defence policy for the latter year. While agreeing that such important international developments as the final settlement of reparations and the consequent evacuation of the Rhineland, the signature of the Briand-Kellogg Pact and the Naval Disarmament Conference of 1930, all appeared to provide an increased insurance against war and a foundation for further steps in the reduction and limitation of armaments, yet they felt bound to point out that many nations were increasing rather than decreasing their military budgets. Further, while agreeing with the view of the Foreign Office that the better prepared Britain was to fulfil her guarantees under the

Locarno Treaty the less likely she was to be called upon to do so, they pointed out that Britain was, in fact, in a less favourable position to fulfil her Locarno guarantees in 1930 than she was, without any written guarantees, to come to the assistance of France and Belgium in 1914.⁽³⁾

Nor were the warnings unheeded. The meeting of the C.I.D. at which this report was considered was a very full meeting, attended by Dominion Prime Ministers and other representatives assembled in London for the 1930 Imperial Conference. Mr. Bennett, the Prime Minister of Canada, pointed out the discrepancy between such agreements as the Briand-Kellog Pact and the widespread rumours, especially in certain continental countries, of the increasing likelihood of war. In reply, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald admitted that some elements in the current international situation caused him disquiet. While he did not think that the assumptions regarding defence need for the present be changed, he did agree that they should be treated in a flexible and not in a dogmatic fashion, and should always be open to amendment in the light of circumstances that could change overnight.⁽⁴⁾

Further doubts were expressed in the course of the proceedings of the Three Party Committee on Disarmament* which met during the spring and early summer of 1931 to advise the Government on the policy to be adopted at the Disarmament Conference to be held at Geneva in 1932. At some of the early meetings of that Committee several members, including Sir Austen Chamberlain who had been Foreign Secretary in 1928, stated their doubts about the continued validity of the Ten Year Rule.⁽⁵⁾ It was admitted that a great deal would depend on whether Germany obtained what she considered satisfactory terms at Geneva. But, even so, the outlook was disquieting and the Committee was not satisfied with the Prime Minister's assurance that the validity of the Ten Year Rule was regularly under review. It was therefore agreed that the Foreign Office should prepare a special appreciation on the subject.

In its subsequent memorandum the Foreign Office held that the assurance that there would be no major war for ten years—an assurance which, after all, depended mainly upon the advice the Foreign Office felt able to provide at any given moment—depended upon five assumptions:

- (a) that during the next ten years no two nations would be involved in a dispute about a vital interest which pacific methods had failed to solve;

* DC(P) This Committee, which first met on 18th March 1931 included the following: R. Macdonald (Chairman), Henderson, Thomas, Shaw, Amulree, Alexander, A. Chamberlain, Hoare, Inskip, Eden, Lloyd George, Samuel, Cecil and Hankey (Secretary).

- (b) that of two nations involved in a dispute one would yet be so averse from war as to prefer to abandon its interest rather than fight;
- (c) that of two nations one would be so weak as to be incapable of fighting with any real hope of success;
- (d) that some organisation existed which desired and was able to restrain intending belligerents;
- (e) that no situation arose creating a war psychology.

On examination, not one of these five assumptions was found to be justified. The Foreign Office memorandum did not jump immediately to the conclusion that the Ten Year Rule should be abolished, for it considered that both the world-wide economic slump and the forthcoming Disarmament Conference held at least some hope of peace. But hope was balanced by anxiety, and the conclusion was 'that what was at the time of giving a justifiable assumption has of late tended rather to become a speculation with hope still predominant, but with doubt shadowing the prospect'.⁽⁶⁾ From this it was thought to follow that the Ten Year Rule might still be considered provisionally operative, but that it must be thoroughly re-examined in the light of developments in 1932. The Cabinet then approved this conclusion, approved it too willingly, perhaps, in view of the gravity and studied moderation of the tone in which the warning had been given.⁽⁷⁾ But that was to be expected of a Government already in the throes of a major economic crisis and led by one whose chief hopes were fixed upon Geneva. The next year, however, the warning was given again, and this time much more compellingly by the Chiefs of Staff in their Annual review of Imperial defence policy for 1932.*

2. *The Economic Crisis 1929-31; Germany and the Far East*

Rude shocks both at home and abroad made that fresh warning necessary. The world-wide economic crisis which began with the collapse on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929 was severely felt in Great Britain as elsewhere. Contraction of industrial production and mounting unemployment presented the Labour Government with problems in the summer of 1931 which it could not solve. The publication of two major reports on the situation in July 1931, the Macmillan Report on Finance and Industry⁽⁸⁾ and the Report of the May Committee on National Expenditure⁽⁹⁾—the latter forecasting a budget deficit of nearly £120 million—were followed by large withdrawals of gold from the Bank of England. On

* See below, Section 3.

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* See below, Section 3.

12th August the members of the Cabinet reassembled from their holidays to deal with the crisis, but were faced with a fundamental difference of opinion on a programme of economies. As a result the Labour Government resigned and, in the last week of the month, a National Government was formed, led by Mr. MacDonald and containing members of all three political parties. The introduction of a supplementary budget early in September seemed, temporarily, to restore confidence. But owing to a variety of causes, the effect was illusory, and on 21st September the Government announced that the country had left the gold standard. On 6th October Parliament was dissolved. At the General Election, and fighting on a programme of economy and sacrifice, the National Government was returned with an enormous majority, its supporters numbering 554 while the Labour party, now in opposition, had shrunk to 52. As it proved, the peak of the political crisis had been passed; but the long drudgery of economy still lay ahead.⁽¹⁰⁾

The two countries besides Great Britain where, for our purposes, the effects of the economic blizzard mattered most were Germany and Japan. During the nineteen-twenties Germany had been moving along the path of peaceful reconciliation with her neighbours, and an integral part of that process had been the goodwill of erstwhile victors, expressed among other ways in the form of large monetary loans. Further, in 1929, on the eve of the world economic depression, Germany and the creditor Powers reached an agreement, the Young Plan, designed to provide a final settlement of reparations on terms considered by many to be a good deal more favourable to Germany than to those countries which had defeated her.

Into this scene of apparent international goodwill was thrust the nightmare of unemployment and financial collapse. The world economic crises caused Germany graver hardship than many other nations. Her credit had already been shaken as a result of the Reichstag elections of 1930, when the Communist vote had increased by a quarter of a million and the Nazi vote from 800,000 to 6½ millions. Gold was immediately withdrawn by foreign lenders. Moreover, the fall in world prices which had been going on since 1929, and began at about the time when the Young Plan was agreed upon, had increased the burden of German reparation payments. The economic blizzard thus struck Germany at a time when she was least able to withstand it. The stream of foreign loans, on which she had hitherto relied, dried up, apart from considerable 'mercy' amounts on short-term, some of them from British sources. This was the position when the Austrian Credit-Anstalt collapsed in May 1931. Banks and credit houses which found their money frozen as a result of the crash in Austria withdrew money from

Germany in order to replenish their liquid resources. In July the Darmstadter Bank closed its doors, and it was known that the Dresdener Bank also was in serious difficulties. In fact, Germany was saved from bankruptcy only by the Hoover moratorium on all inter-governmental debts and then later in July, by a conference in London which resulted in a standstill agreement. By the latter the various banks which had lent Germany short-term credits undertook not to withdraw those credits for a period of six months.

The political results of all this in Germany were extremely serious. Throughout 1931 unemployment rose until, in December, it had topped the 5 million mark, and the accompanying distress offered a fertile breeding ground for the forces of violence now coming into their own under the leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. All along the Nazis had denounced the Young Plan, claiming that the reparations specified in it were beyond Germany's means to pay. Now Germany clearly could not pay. Brüning, the leader of the Catholic Centre Party, who became Chancellor in March 1930, made a last effort to maintain order and financial stability. The British Government, anxious to enable Brüning to weather the storm, invited him to spend a week-end at Chequers and that was followed by further exchanges with French and Italian statesmen. But no benefit emerged substantial enough to stem the mounting crescendo of German violence. Indeed, the failure of the scheme of a Customs Union between Germany and Austria provided another disastrous setback.

The Brüning Government continued in office until the end of May 1932, the Chancellor's main preoccupation in the last months of his administration being the preparations for a Reparations Conference at Lausanne.

His fall marked the end of the last attempt at genuinely peaceful government in Germany and the beginning of those personal and party intrigues which, ostensibly designed to provide some alternative to a Nazi government, ended by bringing such a government into power. On 30th January 1933, Hitler succeeded Schleicher as Chancellor. The period of Nazi rule had begun.

All this coincided with the early stages of the Disarmament Conference which will be considered later.* What needs to be emphasised here is that a deteriorating world situation thought, in 1931 and early 1932, to be largely due to economic causes was now beginning to be interpreted, in the case of Germany, as something which arose at any rate partly from other causes and with implications for Britain's preparations for defence. The foreign policy of the Nazi party had not yet hardened beyond a crude nationalism to a

* See below, p. 82.

comprehensive statement of the foreign policy objectives of national regeneration, and it was still too soon to be certain whether aggressive militarism was an essential element in that policy. But it was not too soon to see some justification for the French view that a concession to Germany in one field would simply inspire demands for wider concessions in others.* In fact, in May 1933, the Foreign Office was claiming that 'whereas up till a year ago the difficulty in the way of world appeasement might speciously, though not altogether justly, be declared to be the attitude of France, who seemed determined to maintain her military and political predominance in Europe, the difficulty is now uncontestedly the threatening and provocative attitude of Germany, who is once more, both spiritually and literally, appearing in her true colours'.⁽¹¹⁾

Trouble in the Far East was equally disturbing. The economic crisis hit Japan with great severity, mostly by curtailing her export market in America. Further, continued anarchic conditions in China—despite some signs of an increase in strength in the central government there—coupled with repeated boycotts of Japanese goods, had substantially interfered with the value of Japan's other main export market. To make matters worse, Japan needed to expand rather than contract her foreign trade to provide for a population increasing at the rate of about 900,000 a year. Actually, in the late nineteen-twenties Sino-Japanese relations had to some extent improved. All Japanese troops were moved from Shantung in May 1929, and a tariff agreement was signed between Japan and China in May 1930. But this improvement was soon shown to be superficial.

The most serious aspect of Sino-Japanese relations for some years past had been the Manchurian question, and the crux of the Manchurian problem was the railway controversy. China's opposition to Japan in Manchuria, developing round Japan's policy of encirclement of the South Manchurian Railway, was at first mainly passive; but it became more active in the late twenties. Friction of this sort culminated in the affair of 18th September 1931. The Japanese military force guarding the zone of the South Manchurian Railway alleged an attack by Chinese troops on the railway line near Mukden, put into effect what appeared to be a carefully prepared military programme, and, by the beginning of January 1932, completed their hold over southern Manchuria. The good offices of the League of Nations were invoked under Article XI of

* Already, in November 1931, the German Government had announced that further transference of reparations annuities would endanger the economic life of their country. When the Lausanne Conference met in June 1932, with von Papen having succeeded Brüning, agreement was reached for the abolition of reparations, subject to certain considerations.

the Covenant, and early in 1932 a League Commission of enquiry, presided over by Lord Lytton, sailed for China.

Even before the Commission sailed, however, events had taken a turn for the worse. China replied to Japan's action in Manchuria by a widespread intensification of the boycott upon trade with Japan, followed in some cases by confiscation of Japanese goods. Friction and disorder grew, culminating in an incident at Shanghai on 18th January 1932 when five Japanese nationals were attacked by a Chinese mob. The Japanese, who had already become restive under the boycott, used this incident as a pretext for strengthening their naval forces at Shanghai and issued an ultimatum which resulted in a clash on 28th January. From then until early March a state of open war continued between Chinese and Japanese forces in and around Shanghai. By the latter date the Japanese forces had achieved all their local objectives and withdrew their last troops from Shanghai by the end of May.⁽¹²⁾

In the meantime, and while attention was concentrated on Shanghai, events in Manchuria had not stood still. By mid-February 1932 the principal towns in the three Eastern Provinces were in Japanese hands. At that point the new provincial governments, which had been set up in various centres under Japanese auspices, met in Conference at Mukden and on 19th February issued a declaration of independence. The Powers were then officially notified of the existence of the new state of Manchukuo in March. In fact, however, the declaration of the independence of Manchukuo at this moment was a blunt notice by Japan to the Powers that she would tolerate no interference with her Manchurian policy, an attitude which, at bottom and despite the appointment of the Lytton Commission, she had adopted from the start. And scarcely had the Commission finished its investigation when, at the beginning of September 1932, Japan announced her recognition of Manchukuo.

The Lytton Report was published on 2nd October.⁽¹³⁾ While admitting much that justified Japanese action in Manchuria, the report claimed that the new state of Manchukuo was not an expression of the popular will of the inhabitants of the four Eastern Provinces. It was on this point that the issue, as it confronted the League, really turned. In asking for negotiations between China and Japan the League took its stand upon the claim that 'the maintenance and recognition of the present régime in Manchuria cannot be regarded as a solution'. Japan on the other hand, while nominally prepared to accept the League's attempts at reconciliation, stated as a necessary condition that there should be no challenge to the continued independence of Manchukuo. There was no compromise between these views, and in February 1933 Japan gave preliminary notice of her intention to withdraw from the League.

There never was, from the Japanese point of view, any connection between the trouble at Shanghai and her Manchurian adventure even though the boycott and anti-Japanese agitation at Shanghai were themselves caused by the invasion of Manchuria. The Japanese Government do not appear to have had any intention or wish to get involved in trouble at Shanghai, and blundered into it mostly because of the clumsiness of their Admiral on the spot. But having blundered and met with an unexpected, although only temporary check from the Chinese forces there, they took action which, by its violence and disregard of international agreements, made Shanghai and Manchuria appear to be part of one plan. It was, indeed, natural that public opinion in Great Britain should temporarily have been more concerned with events at Shanghai than with those in Manchuria, even though the latter were of wider international significance. British interests in Shanghai were of great value. Moreover, some influential opinion, at Geneva and elsewhere, saw in the Shanghai incident a carefully prepared programme to put into force an 'Asiatic Monroe Doctrine' which would preserve eastern Asia for exploitation and domination by Japan alone. Small wonder, then, that public opinion in some quarters demanded that action be taken against Japan by the League.⁽¹⁴⁾

This is no place to describe in detail the deliberations of the League on these disputes. They were complicated by the fact that although the United States had an observer at Geneva during the deliberations, and although Mr. Stimson took continued, open and even forceful interest in them, the United States was not itself a League member. The problem for the League was the choice between attempting to compel Japan to observe her obligations under the Covenant and such other agreements as the Nine Power Treaty—compulsion which could be exercised only by war or by those means short of war specified in Article XVI of the Covenant—or attempting to persuade her by argument to adopt the machinery provided by the Covenant for a peaceful settlement of the dispute. Under the first, it was realised that although the withdrawal of ambassadors from Japan might not involve war, economic sanctions almost certainly would.⁽¹⁵⁾ Under the second, it became increasingly clear that Japan would willingly admit no serious interference with her actions in Manchuria, and that to proceed simply by argument involved an admission by the League that it had failed to enforce the fundamental principle that a member state might not, without prior recourse to the recognised means of peaceful settlement, take the law into its own hands.⁽¹⁶⁾ This choice was a particularly acute one for Great Britain. Britain, apart from the disputants themselves, was the member of the League with the largest interests at stake and the most considerable means of enforcing recognition of them.

From the beginning His Majesty's Government, while desiring to support the League, admitted in private that 'the sanctions provided for in Article XVI of the Covenant were not suitable and could not in practice be applied in the present case'.⁽¹⁷⁾ This involved every effort to dissuade the Chinese from shifting the ground of their appeal from Article XI to Article XVI. The Government were also anxious to avoid any action which might exacerbate hostile feeling in the Japanese press and so give rise to the claim that anti-Japanese moves at Geneva were instigated by Great Britain. It is a fair summary of British policy in these months to say that the Cabinet were acutely conscious of the importance of avoiding any step liable to precipitate a crisis in which Britain, whether as a member of the League of Nations or alone, would be involved as a belligerent in the Far East.⁽¹⁸⁾ While making public their view that they approved the Lytton Report, and in particular that section of the Report which condemned Japan for taking the law into her own hands in Manchuria despite admitted provocations and her unique position there, they said equally clearly that 'in no circumstances will the Government authorise this country to be a party to the struggle'.⁽¹⁹⁾ This decision can be illustrated by the fact that there were throughout the crisis no major discussions, either in the Cabinet or the C.I.D., of the strategic implications of the situation in the Far East, in the sense of making preparations—war insurance preparations—against the risk of an outbreak of war there in which Britain might be involved. Warnings were given by the Ministers most concerned of the weakness of the defences of Hong Kong and Singapore. And some reinforcements were sent to Shanghai early in 1932. But these latter were really no more than adequate for the protection of British nationals and property on the spot.⁽²⁰⁾ They were not remotely adequate for a major campaign, nor were they sent for that purpose.

In coming to their view the Government had behind them the full support of their ambassador in Tokyo and of their defence advisers at home. By 4th February 1932, the British Ambassador in Tokyo was warning his government that a false step might cause the Japanese to take some action which would render war with the Powers inevitable, and that the Japanese Government was capable of replying to action under Article XVI of the Covenant by reprisals or acts of war against the Powers. A week later he wrote that co-operation with Japan might 'well entail fewer military commitments' than thwarting her.⁽²¹⁾ From the beginning of the crisis the ambassador took the view 'that the Japanese cannot be turned out of Manchuria without a world war, which it is our first duty to prevent; and that in these circumstances we must trust to the Japanese people gradually realising that they cannot with advantage

to themselves pursue a policy of aggression in China in face of the passive hostility of the rest of the world.'⁽²²⁾

3. *The Cancellation of the Ten Year Rule, 1932*

The Chiefs of Staff, compiling their annual review of Imperial defence policy for 1932 at this point, and doing so with special reference to the assumption that had hitherto governed much of their thinking, viz. that at any given date there would be no major war for ten years, felt obliged to warn the Government of the weakness of the Empire's defences in terms of unprecedented seriousness.⁽²³⁾ The sense of urgency in this review was immediately prompted by current events in the Far East. Without necessarily imputing any aggressive intentions to Japan *vis-à-vis* the other Great Powers, the report pointed out that in the event of war in the Far East the state of British defences there was as unsatisfactory as it well could be. The units of the Fleet stationed there included nothing larger than 10,000 ton cruisers mounting 8-inch guns moored in a cul-de-sac in the Whangpoo River. The defences of Hong Kong and Singapore, the latter port being essential to the maintenance of a fleet of capital ships on arrival in the Far East, were completely inadequate; garrisons were well under strength, gun defences were out of date, and such essential elements as mines, boom defences and anti-aircraft guns were lacking. The naval oil supplies at Trincomalee, necessary for the movement of the Fleet to the Far East, were unprotected—there was not even a garrison there. As a result, in the view of the Chiefs of Staff, 'the whole of our territory in the Far East, as well as the coastline of India and the Dominions and our vast trade and shipping' lay open to attack. To make matters worse, the supporters of the League at home were urging upon the Government a course of action which might well end in a resort to force by Japan, and the heaviest burden in such a war must fall upon the British Empire.

While admitting that Britain's 'political difficulties in dealing with the Sino-Japanese problems at the present juncture arose very largely from the insecurity of Hong Kong and Singapore',⁽²⁴⁾ the Chiefs of Staff in no way criticised the attitude adopted by the Government in the immediate crisis; indeed, their every comment implied approval based upon acute awareness of the inability of this country to fight a campaign in the Far East in the existing state of its defences there.⁽²⁵⁾ Further, they emphasised that the present anxious situation in the Far East might well continue for some time to come. Instead of 'no war for ten years', war might actually begin tomorrow, and there was no obvious end to the circumstances which made that risk possible. The Chiefs of Staff stressed the suddenness

and success with which Japan had acted in 1931, despite the general disapproval of world opinion. Britain's weakness in the Far East invited such methods from any Power wishing to attack her.

'Normally, our Battle Fleet', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'would require 38 days from the zero hour in which to reach Singapore. That is the basis on which the theoretical scale of defence of Singapore and other ports in the Far East has been worked out. But in their present weak state these ports would be liable to capture, or at least to the destruction of their facilities, before the arrival of the Fleet. Unless these ports have been strengthened adequately and reinforcements arrive in time, on a calculation of reasonable probabilities we should have to assume either that they would be captured or that their facilities would be destroyed in the first month of a war. The position would then become one of the utmost gravity. Improvisations would be required on a vast scale before the Fleet could move to the East, and we cannot calculate how long would elapse before an attempt could be made—and then under very adverse conditions—to re-establish our naval supremacy in Eastern seas. In the interval our vast territorial and trade interests in the Far East, and our communications with the Dominions and India, would be open to attack. What the political reaction in India and in the various Colonies would be we leave to experts to determine.'⁽²⁶⁾

Nor could it be claimed that, bad as the situation was in the Far East, it was in any way peculiar. The Empire was equally unprepared for every major commitment which might involve its armed Services. Both in numbers of ships and in standard of equipment the Royal Navy was at all points deficient in the means to protect overseas communications and supplies, a duty which lay at the heart of Imperial defence policy. At home, ports were provided with obsolete defences, and the Royal Air Force still stood far short of a programme originally announced in 1923. In size, in the quality of its armaments and in its possible rate of mobilisation, the Army was totally inadequate to liabilities which might arise under the Covenant of the League of Nations or the Treaty of Locarno, and hardly sufficient for the defence of India or Britain's other eastern possessions. This general state of unpreparedness, it was argued, was due not only to a national decision to spend money on social services rather than upon defence, but primarily to the 'insurmountable barrier to the execution of any policy in Imperial Defence' raised by the assumption that there would be no major war for ten years. That assumption was responsible not only for the decline of the armed Services, but also for the slow wasting away of the country's armaments industry. Since the end of the war in 1918 the Services had lived on accumulated stocks and new orders had been cut to a

minimum. For example, in 1914, just before the war, there were building or ordered in the United Kingdom 111 warships of all categories, twenty-three of them on foreign account. That total included nineteen capital ships. The corresponding figures for February 1932, were thirty-five ships building or ordered, of which five were on foreign account. The latter total included no capital ships. With this drop had gone an elimination of building capacity and a loss of vital skilled labour.

Finally, the Chiefs of Staff claimed, all this had been accompanied by a complacent optimism in public opinion and by widespread ignorance of the facts of the situation which greatly increased the difficulty of taking the necessary steps to make good the harm that had been done. Here, again, it was impossible to hope for any change so long as the Government acted on the assumption that there would be no major war for ten years.

To their criticisms the Chiefs of Staff added three recommendations. First, the assumption governing the Estimates for the Defence Services, that from any given date there would be no major war for ten years, should be cancelled. Second, a start should be made in providing for commitments which were purely defensive, including the defence of bases. First priority should be given to requirements in the Far East. Third, a decision on these points should not be delayed until after the results of the Disarmament Conference were known; what had happened in the Far East was a warning that discussions for the making of international agreements did not necessarily preclude current acts of war.

This report came before C.I.D. on 22nd March 1932, and there was no disagreement with its general political and strategic analysis. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary admitted, though with regret, 'that the ten year assumption was a dangerous one'. The recommendations of the Chiefs of Staff were therefore, at least in theory, agreed to.⁽²⁷⁾ When the Cabinet met the following day two provisos were added which ultimately involved a delay of eighteen months before anything was done to put those recommendations into effect. The Cabinet argued that acceptance of the Chiefs of Staff report must not be taken to justify increased expenditure on defence without regard to the very serious financial and economic situation that still prevailed. Secondly, Ministers took the view that the whole subject was closely connected with the question of disarmament and 'required further exploration'.⁽²⁸⁾

To understand the almost unbelievable tardiness in accepting the practical implications of warnings which nobody in a responsible position denied, it is essential to remember that those warnings coincided with the depths of an unprecedented economic depression and with the meeting of a conference at Geneva that marked the cul-

mination of years of work to achieve a major measure of general disarmament. Leaving out of account the differing responsibilities of statesmen and private citizens, it would be unrealistic to deny that, in the early spring of 1932, the thoughts of the vast majority of people in Britain—statesmen and citizens alike—were concentrated on domestic affairs and, in particular, on unemployment. In international affairs, those who thought seriously were either hopeful of the Disarmament Conference or, if without hope, unwilling to condemn its efforts by so early an expression of their fears. Against either of these trends in public opinion a substantial measure of rearmament could have made little headway. Against both combined it was fighting a hopeless battle.

Let us examine both these factors a little further. First the economic situation. It is true that the abandonment of the gold standard, severe economies in the domestic budget, and the policy soon to be adopted at the Ottawa Conference of 1932, all contributed to a slowly reviving trade and to a steady decrease in unemployment. But the spring of 1932 was much too soon for these effects to have become apparent. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Treasury argued that in such a situation financial risks were greater than any others that could, at present, be envisaged; that to avoid such risks a period of recuperation and restricted national expenditure was necessary; and that, finally, strategic risks must be run, and increased expenditure on armaments avoided, until the financial situation had improved. In practical terms this meant, so the Treasury argued, that even had Hong Kong and Singapore been ready to withstand a Japanese attack in the recent Far Eastern crisis, no such localised defence would have been worth-while unless Britain had been prepared to sustain major operations in Far Eastern waters. 'The fact is that in present circumstances we are no more in a position financially and economically to engage in a major war in the Far East than we are militarily. It would seem, therefore, that as regards the Far East we must for the time being be content with applying such deterrents as may be available.'⁽²⁹⁾ In effect, as we have already seen, this was the view that the Cabinet also took. When the Chiefs of Staff returned to the attack eighteen months later and pointed out that little had been done meanwhile to implement their earlier recommendations, the Chancellor of the Exchequer admitted that this was because the Cabinet had earlier taken his advice, balanced the risks, and decided that the financial situation had then been the most threatening.⁽³⁰⁾

It was in some ways unfortunate that Britain's inability even to contemplate an active Far Eastern strategy in the crisis of 1931-32 should have been so easily explicable in economic terms. Had the acute financial restrictions of the immediate post-depression period

not provided so obvious an explanation of military weakness, then it is just possible that the crisis in Manchuria might have induced that far-reaching analysis of the feasibility of an active strategy against Japan in a world war which was, in fact, postponed until 1939.*

The effect of economy was not limited to the first year of the life of the National Government. Introducing the Air Estimates to the House of Commons on 14th March 1933 the Under-Secretary of State for Air stated that the need for economy was no less pressing than it had been a year before, and that it had 'had a similar influence upon the Estimates . . . now before the House'.⁽³¹⁾ Those estimates, in fact, represented yet a further reduction upon those of the year before. A similar story could be told of the Army. The Financial Secretary to the War Office, Mr. Duff Cooper, introducing the Army Estimates a few days earlier, had indeed announced an increase on the previous year, but added that the present Estimates were still £2 million lower than those introduced to the House in 1931. Moreover, the increased expenditure, such as it was, was not for any augmentation in the size of the army, in the scale of munitions or in preparation for war. It was merely to replace cuts made a year before 'in face of the danger of national bankruptcy which was then thought—and rightly thought—to be even a greater danger than that of having inefficient fighting services'.⁽³²⁾

Meanwhile the other cause of delay, the Disarmament Conference, was pursuing its labours at Geneva. The Conference assembled on 2nd February 1932. Its background must be seen not only in the many years' work of the Preparatory Commission, but also in the war then raging between China and Japan and in the party manoeuvres which were rapidly bringing Hitler nearer to power in Germany. The influence of a now clamant Germany was, indeed, the decisive influence in the life of the Conference. The assurance given at Versailles that the unilateral disarmament of Germany would ultimately be followed by a general limitation of armaments, was now being quoted by Germany as a definite treaty obligation. The German representatives therefore came to the Conference demanding the abolition of all restrictions upon Germany's right to re-arm, except in so far as these restrictions were equally enforceable upon all nations by common agreement. Ostensibly, at this stage, the Germans seemed more interested to argue that other Powers should disarm to Germany's level than that she should be allowed to rearm to theirs. On 9th February Dr. Brüning, in a speech at the Conference, stated that Germany expected the Conference 'to solve the problems of general disarmament on the

* See below, Chap. X, Section 4.

basis of equal rights and equal security for all peoples'; and German proposals submitted to the Conference a few days later showed that Germany considered that her own 'equality of status' would be secured by applying to all countries the system of limitation and control of armaments applied to herself and her former allies by the peace treaties. To this the French answered with a demand for measures of security as the essential preliminary to any measure of German rearmament. Their main concern, whether by means of an international police force or by the agreed continuation of the inferiority of German armaments, was to provide France with some tangible protection against a repetition of 1870 and 1914. Such a guarantee, however devised, was in their view the essential preliminary either to agreed rearmament by Germany or agreed disarmament by the other powers.

These conflicting demands formed the one constant theme running throughout the life of the Conference, and ultimately they occasioned its collapse. In that conflict Britain at times showed much sympathy with Germany but, and certainly during the early stages of the Conference, rather less with France. In some ways the situation had changed little since 1925 when, to some people in Britain, France had seemed the main obstacle to a security treaty which included Germany. Now, in 1932, the desire in Britain for disarmament, and for a disarmament agreement which would reflect the aims of Germany as of other countries, was powerful and urgent. Some, like Lord Lothian, argued that 'the first condition to reform [the Nazi régime] is that we should be willing to do justice to Germany',⁽³³⁾ and for those who thought that way, the French counter-demand for security was an unworthy and irritating obstacle. 'If I reply that France will not agree to recognise or legalise the amount of rearmament that Germany has already carried through' wrote one member of the Foreign Office, the 'press retort immediately is, that in that case France and not Germany is the obstacle to the carrying through of a Disarmament Convention.'⁽³⁴⁾ This particular quality of the British mood in the middle nineteen-thirties should not be forgotten when trying to explain why it took so long for politicians and public alike to assess German aims more realistically. To begin with, the under dog was regarded as the symbol of disarmament, not the obstacle to it.

The Disarmament Conference began with attempts to achieve a working formula, the British contribution being Sir John Simon's concept of 'qualitative disarmament', i.e. the prohibition of weapons which, by agreement, could be defined as aggressive. Unfortunately no such agreement was possible. In June the President of the United States put forward a scheme based on existing mathematical proportions in the size of armies, and bearing some similarity to the

way in which the Washington and London Naval Treaties had been designed. The German Government under von Papen, acting under radical pressure from home and sensing both sympathy and disagreement at Geneva which it might turn to good account, announced on 14th September its intention of withdrawing from the Conference. To this the British Government replied with a note in which they denied the juridical argument that disarmament was no longer binding on Germany since it had not been followed by disarmament among the victor Powers. On the other hand they expressly admitted the moral force of the German claim by saying that 'the limitation of Germany's armaments contained in the Treaty was intended to be and announced to be the precursor of general limitation by others'.⁽³⁵⁾ In asking the Cabinet to come to some decision in these matters, the Foreign Secretary argued that the practical choice lay between allowing Germany to rearm within certain agreed limits, or her continued abstention from the Disarmament Conference. However reluctantly, the Cabinet had to admit that they preferred the former, partly because they could not deny the moral strength of Germany's claim and partly because Germany would not be denied anyway.⁽³⁶⁾

In December 1932 Germany was coaxed back to Geneva under cover of a formula recognising her claim to 'equality of rights in a system which would provide security for all nations', an obvious attempt to square the circle which achieved no more than Germany's renewed presence at the Conference table. When the Conference resumed its work in February 1933, the international outlook had greatly worsened. On 30th January Hitler had become Chancellor of the German Reich. A little later on Japan announced her intention to resign from the League.* At this point the British Government made their biggest effort to revive hope in disarmament. On 16th March Mr. Ramsay MacDonald produced a new draft convention which attempted to combine in one document those proposals which, up to date, had appeared to gain some measure of general approval.⁽³⁷⁾ Despite many difficulties, and those by no means limited to differences between the French and German points of view, the MacDonald plan was accepted by the General Commission, in early June, as the basis for a future convention. The conference then adjourned until the autumn, and the summer months were spent in attempts to translate the draft into workable terms.

Right at the end of September Sir John Simon drew up a revised form of the Prime Minister's draft, not so much as a restatement of what Britain herself favoured as 'an honest effort by the party to the Conference which is in the best position to do it, to mark out the

* See above, p. 75.

necessary middle course if there is ever going to be a Convention at all'.⁽³⁸⁾ The Foreign Secretary urged his colleagues to see that Britain must give a lead since no other country could, claiming that '... the other members of the Conference now look to us for guidance more than ever.' The most important proposals in the draft were for a plan in two stages each of four years, in the second of which the signatories to a Convention would be bound to reduce their armaments in specified stages. Simon was far from optimistic that his plan would be accepted but he did claim that attitudes towards it would be significant for future developments. And he warned the Cabinet of what would happen were the Disarmament Conference to end in failure.

'Time', he wrote, 'is on the side of the forces in Germany which may be secretly preparing for a reversal of the verdict of the last war. If, after all this talk, no Disarmament Convention is reached Germany will, in law, continue to be bound by the Treaty of Versailles, but I do not see how she is going to be made to observe it. She will claim to be free to rearm without any conditions, and, once the new régime in Germany settles down and becomes more respectable, there will be many people who will say that there is a good deal in the German claim that she has waited fourteen years for equality and cannot be expected to wait any longer.'

On this occasion, certainly, Sir John Simon was neither uncertain in his forecast nor hesitant in his advice to other Ministers.

When the Conference reassembled in October 1933, the British Foreign Secretary presented the draft in its revised form. At that point Herr Hitler suddenly announced Germany's withdrawal both from the Conference and from the League of Nations on 14th October. From then the Disarmament Conference was clearly doomed. The British Government however, did not completely abandon those efforts at disarmament which it had made during the past eighteen months. Rather, it reaffirmed its belief in international co-operation for the reduction and limitation of armaments, admitted that nothing could be done without Germany, and set about investigating the possible methods of achieving its aims outside the Conference.⁽³⁹⁾

This policy must be seen as the background to the next phase of our story. Just as the Chiefs of Staff had prepared their annual review of Imperial Defence for 1932 at the most acute stage of the Sino-Japanese dispute, so now they completed their annual review of Imperial Defence policy for 1933 just before Germany produced her bombshell at Geneva but with the threat of failure already looming.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In it they pointed out how much the international scene had deteriorated since they last wrote. In the Far East although

tension had temporarily relaxed with the signing of a truce between China and Japan, they saw no sign of genuine stabilisation for many years to come. The Far East thus remained a potential danger zone. But no longer was it the sole source of danger. In Europe Germany was once more becoming a 'public menace'; not only had she begun to re-arm, but she would almost certainly continue to do so until, within a few years, she would again have to be reckoned with as a formidable military power. At that point her Locarno obligations might well involve Britain in a major war on the side of France against Germany. Despite all this, with the one exception of a decision to expedite the first stage of the defence programme at Singapore by a matter of eighteen months,⁽⁴¹⁾ nothing had so far been done to rectify that totally inadequate state of our defence Services which had been described in detail eighteen months before. While the Ten Year Rule had been abandoned, no other guiding principle had yet replaced it. Finally, the whole situation would take a further important turn for the worse were the Disarmament Conference really to fail.

By the time the C.I.D. took note of this report on 9th November 1933, the Disarmament Conference had for all practical purposes failed. The C.I.D. accepted the main general recommendations of the Chiefs of Staff, and agreed to forward the following resolution to the Cabinet:

- '(i) For the present the expenditure of the Defence Departments should be governed by the Report of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee and the following considerations of priority mentioned therein; the defence of our possessions and interests in the Far East; European Commitments; the defence of India;
- (ii) no expenditure should for the present be incurred on measures of defence required to provide exclusively against attack by the United States, France or Italy;
- (iii) the above conclusions must be kept under careful observation by the Government Departments concerned, and, in any event, should be reviewed annually by the Committee of Imperial Defence.'⁽⁴²⁾

Some objection, although it was by no means unanimous, was raised to the order of priority under (i), with the suggestion that Britain should make some effort to improve her relations with Japan. Here lay the germ of much subsequent thought upon the importance of avoiding simultaneous hostilities in Europe and the Far East. So far as (ii) was concerned, the Chiefs of Staff had already pointed out that present good relations with France and Italy meant that defensive arrangements in the Mediterranean, although in many

respects obsolete, need not occupy a high order of priority, while the United States had not for years been considered as a possible enemy in general reviews of this kind. This decision to eliminate certain Powers from their immediate calculations enabled the C.I.D. to reduce the proportions of the problems to more manageable size. Finally, the Committee recommended that 'the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, with representatives of the Treasury, and the Foreign Office, and the Secretary to the C.I.D., should prepare a programme for meeting our worst deficiencies for transmission to the Cabinet'. By this last procedure it was hoped to reconcile the possible competing claims of the three Services for what would certainly be a limited amount of money, and also to combine their deficiency programmes into some co-ordinated scheme of national and imperial defence.

The Cabinet considered these recommendations a week later and accepted them. With regard to the committee of officials who were to prepare the deficiency programme, the Cabinet decided that their proposals, when complete, should be further considered in their political aspects by a ministerial committee. The Cabinet themselves would be quite uncommitted until the proposals came before them after both of these preparatory stages.⁽⁴³⁾

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| (13) The Report of the Lytton Commission (League of Nations Publications, 1932, vii, (12)) gives a summary of Sino-Japanese relations in this period. See also C.P. 65(32) for a brief account. | 75 |
| (14) See, for example, questions put by Mr. Mander to the Foreign Secretary in the House of Commons on 17th February 1932, H.C. 5s, Vol. 261: 1611-12. For other references to such pressure, both at home and abroad, see Cab. Cons. 12(32) and 14(32) | 76 |
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| (18) For a later account of this attitude, see the Foreign Secretary's statement to the House, H.C. 5s, Vol. 275, 52 ff. | 77 |
| (19) Ibid. | 77 |
| (20) For some discussion of Anglo-American reactions to Japanese aggression, see R. Bassett, <i>Democracy and Foreign Policy</i> (London, 1952) Chapter 7 | 77 |
| (21) C.I.D. 1082-B, para. 11 | 77 |
| (22) F.O. F.694/694/23, para. 2. See also Middlemas & Barnes, <i>op. cit.</i> , Chapter 27 | 78 |
| (23) C.I.D. 1082-B | 78 |
| (24) C.I.D. 1084-B | 78 |
| (25) C.I.D. 1082-B, 1084-B and 1103-B | 78 |

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| (26) | C.I.D. 1082-B, para. 16 | 79 |
| (27) | C.I.D. 255th Mtg. | 80 |
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| (29) | C.I.D. 1087-B, para. 3 | 81 |
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| (31) | H.C. 5s, Vol. 275: 1795 | 82 |
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| (33) | Sir James Butler, <i>Lord Lothian</i> (London, 1960) p. 197 | 83 |
| (34) | F.O. C. 7979/20/18, 21st November 1934 | 83 |
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PART II

THE DEFICIENCY PROGRAMMES, 1933-36

PART II

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST DEFICIENCY
PROGRAMME, 1933-34

1. *The First Report of the Defence Requirements
Sub-Committee, November 1933-February 1934*

THE COMMITTEE of officials thus set up, the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee* held its first meeting on 14th November 1933 and signed its report on 28th February 1934. The full details of that report need not be considered here, for many of them were subsequently altered by the Ministerial Committee which later considered them in their political aspects. But the general strategic principles upon which the detailed recommendations were based, and the principles upon which they were amended, do demand inspection and comparison with the subsequent views of Ministers.

The investigations of the D.R.C., as we have already seen, lay within certain fairly well defined limits. France, Italy and the United States of America were to be taken as friendly Powers against whom no defensive preparations were, for the present, necessary. The areas to be considered in such preparations were the Far East, Europe and India, with particular attention to Japan and Germany. The preparations themselves were to be limited to making good those deficiencies in Britain's defensive arrangements which had accumulated during fifteen years of economy and deliberate disarmament; there was no intention of launching a programme of new and competitive rearmament. Moreover, the D.R.C. took the view that in asking it to give priority in its considerations to the Far East, Europe and India, the original intention of the C.I.D. was not so much to lay down a hard and fast order of priority as to single these items out as 'contingencies for which our defensive preparations ought at the present time to provide'.⁽¹⁾ Although the actions of Japan had first directed attention to the unsatisfactory state of

* It ranked as a sub-committee of the C.I.D. From now on referred to as the D.R.C., this abbreviation being regularly used in official documents. This Sub-Committee set up on 14th November 1933 consisted of Hankey (Chairman), Warren Fisher, Vansittart and the three Chiefs of Staff.

Imperial defences, the trend of recent events had accentuated the dangers of the European situation. This followed from the failure of France and Germany to come to terms over disarmament, and from the obvious intention of Germany to re-arm, with or without the consent of other Powers.* The Committee, therefore, considered that although some of Britain's immediate defensive arrangements, particularly in making good naval deficiencies and the defence of ports in the Far East, must be designed to improve her position *vis-à-vis* Japan, Germany should be taken as the ultimate potential enemy in relation to whom long-range defence policy must be planned.⁽²⁾ Already, in effect, Germany headed the list of Britain's potential enemies, and nothing seriously affected her position there before war broke out in September, 1939.†

The D.R.C recommended that every effort should be made to resume former cordial relations with Japan.

This point requires some further explanation. The renunciation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1922, together with the various agreements which had taken its place, had by no means solved all Britain's problems in the Far East. The substitution of America for Japan as her closest friend in that area had deprived Britain of that peculiarly close association with Japan which, it is true, had earlier provided cover for Japanese expansion, but which might now have provided a means of combining that expansion with a friendly regard for Britain's own strategic and commercial interests. The crisis of 1931-32 had already shown up the weakness of Britain's new position in the Far East. Sir Warren Fisher, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Treasury and a member of the D.R.C., took the view that 'the worst of our deficiencies is our entanglement with the U.S.A. and all its consequences', and recommended that Britain should be prepared to sacrifice American friendship—and include if necessary, preparations for hostilities against America—in order to regain the more valuable friendship of Japan.⁽⁴⁾ This advice fitted in with that of H.M. Ambassador in Japan, Sir F. O. Lindley. 'My own view', he wrote, '... is that our policy in the Far East should be based, as in the past, on the principle of friendship with Japan. Any other principle imperils our whole Eastern possessions. But, if this principle is accepted, it must be with our eyes open. It is not possible to work on it with any success unless we accept the corollary that, in the Far East, Japan comes first and America second'. Further, he warned that Japan had probably been angling for friendship with

* For details of German re-armament see below, Chap. VII.

† So far as India was concerned, the broad assumption of the Committee was that if Britain's forces were made strong enough to ensure the defence of the United Kingdom against Germany and of the Far East against Japan, then they would also be strong enough to carry out the Defence of India plan.⁽³⁾

Germany as well as with Great Britain and America during the past year, and forecast that 'a country as powerful as Japan will not long have to look for friends'.⁽⁶⁾ The D.R.C. as a whole did not accept the extreme view that American friendship should now be sacrificed for a return to the old alliance; indeed such a move was described as not 'practical politics'. On the other hand, it did strongly urge the importance of getting back 'at least to our old terms of cordiality and respect with Japan'.⁽⁶⁾

There was assumed to be 'no insuperable difficulty' in the way of such a policy and, indeed, it was argued both from despatches from the British Ambassador in Tokyo and from some other outward and visible signs, that the time was propitious for such a new approach. The Japanese Foreign Minister had recently declared in the Diet that the traditional friendship of Japan 'with Great Britain remains unshaken and the two island empires can by wholehearted collaboration effectively serve the cause of universal peace'.⁽⁷⁾ In a lengthy and detailed summary of the situation in the Far East drawn up at this time the Foreign Office in London stated that, according to some evidence, Japan had lived down the spirit of resentment conceived against Britain at Geneva in 1931-32, and that the only remaining bone of contention was the issue of trade competition.⁽⁸⁾ This was a change in affairs which was thought to be at least partly due to a hardening of Russia's attitude in the Far East and a consequent desire on the part of Japan to repeat the conditions of 1904, when Britain's friendship had protected her against a stab in the back.

In fact, no moves made at this time, either commercial or political, resulted in any formal embodiment of what appeared to be a friendlier atmosphere. Anglo-Japanese negotiations on the marketing of cotton and rayon goods showed no possible compromise.⁽⁹⁾ The hope that Britain might recover her old terms of friendship with Japan led also, in some quarters, to the suggestion of a non-aggression pact between the two countries. This failed too, and failed at a very early stage of enquiry. Not only was the Foreign Office aware of the serious risks to Anglo-American friendship involved in such a move, risks which it was convinced should not be taken, it also argued that what mattered most to Japan, despite that country's apparent wish for friendlier relations, was her claim to naval parity with America and Britain, a more serious claim than any other she had made so far, and one which the Government was not prepared to consider outside the preliminary talks for the forthcoming Naval Conference of 1935.⁽¹⁰⁾

The fact that neither the Foreign Office nor the Board of Trade could recommend any immediate and positive action for improving relations with Japan did not rob this particular recommendation of

the D.R.C. of its importance. For what was from one point of view little more than a pious expression of hope was, from another, a clear indication that the Committee realised how grave would be the situation if Britain were faced with war simultaneously in the Far East and in Europe. The Committee of officials, however, unlike its Ministerial successor, did not at any stage ask itself whether such a two-front war could be sustained and, if not, which theatre should be sacrificed. Indeed, it argued that, to get on better terms with Japan, it was essential to show a tooth by reinforcing Britain's military and naval position in the Far East, thus negotiating with Japan from a position of strength rather than weakness, even though an ultimate policy of accommodation and friendship was envisaged.⁽¹¹⁾ This view was strongly supported, and again without examination of the strategic implications, by the Foreign Office.⁽¹²⁾

Emphasis on the increasing danger from Germany affected one further assumption—the period within which the deficiency programmes should be completed. This depended to some extent, of course, on financial considerations and on the ability of the Services to expand at the rate required without actually placing themselves on a war-time footing. But it also depended on estimates, inevitably very vague ones, of the minimum period Germany herself would need to re-arm, and that was assumed to be a period of at least five years.⁽¹³⁾ The major part of the programme recommended was, therefore, a five-year programme. It should not be assumed that, at this point, war against Germany in 1939 was clearly foreseen. That certainly was not so. Estimates of the rate of German rearmament were still vague. But, from what was known, it was considered that five years of such rearmament would be necessary before she became a definite menace. Further, the Principal Supply Officers' Committee of the C.I.D. had already been given five years as the 'hypothetical time limit' in which to prepare its supply plans for the outbreak of war, although that particular estimate appears to have been based more upon the minimum time the Committee needed to complete its work than upon any clear view of the point at which these completed plans might have to be put into operation. On this very sketchy basis five years was, then, considered the shortest practicable period for German preparations and our own.*⁽¹⁴⁾

Within these limits the programme recommended by the D.R.C. was as follows. For the Navy, the modernisation of most of its capital ships to keep pace with similar action elsewhere, particularly in Japan, the building up of essential stores and the modernisation

* During a meeting of the C.I.D. on 9th November 1933 it was pointed out that 'the adoption of a hypothetical time limit of five years was required merely as a "yardstick" on which the Principal Supply Officers' Committee desired to regulate their work'.

of naval bases. Under this last heading, Singapore should be in an operational condition by 1938. New construction programmes could not be included as 'deficiencies' and, in any case, depended largely on decisions to be reached in 1935;⁽¹⁵⁾ they, therefore, were not dealt with in detail. But the omission (apart from an undiscussed table of figures), and particularly since the Naval Staff were already thinking in terms of a two-power standard, meant that this section of the report bore only limited reference to current naval plans.⁽¹⁶⁾

For the Army, the admission of Germany as the ultimate potential enemy was taken to imply the need for an expeditionary force for the primary purpose of defending the Low Countries; the development of air power meant that the exclusion of an enemy from the Low Countries was of greater importance than ever before and could be ensured only by operations on land. The expeditionary force envisaged was to consist of four infantry divisions, one cavalry division, a tank brigade, and two air defence brigades, the whole force to be capable of being mobilised in one month. In addition, the Army would be responsible for an expanding anti-aircraft defence scheme, comprising anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. Although these two liabilities of the Army were, in the report, accorded enormously different sums of money and ranked, respectively, as the first and last among the obligations of the Army within the general scheme of Imperial defence, they came soon to compete for priority and the last, for a time, overtook the first. This change was part of and, indeed, symbolised the changing nature of the pre-war Cabinet's views on defence.

Finally, it was recommended that the Royal Air Force should at last complete, again within the next five years, the 1923 scheme of 52 squadrons for Home Defence. The report also recommended substantial reinforcement of the Fleet Air Arm under the Naval construction scheme programme, and ten more squadrons for overseas defence east of Suez. In 1933 the 52 squadron scheme still remained ten squadrons short of the original programme. In asking for the completion of the scheme the D.R.C. report was not, however, simply keeping to a plan which had been on paper for over ten years; it was asking for something less. The 1923 programme had been designed to provide the smallest number of fighters and bombers to deal simply with an attack on this country by France. The 52 squadrons of 1933, now really designed to oppose attack by Germany, were also to provide a contingent of 19 squadrons to accompany the expeditionary force.⁽¹⁷⁾ On this last point, however, a major error had crept in. During the Committee's discussions, Sir Edward Ellington, the Chief of the Air Staff, despite some very strong doubts expressed by other members of the Committee, had stated categorically, and after the matter had been referred back to him

for further investigation, that 19 squadrons could be provided from the 52 to accompany the expeditionary force.⁽¹⁸⁾ On the day the final report of the Committee was issued, the Chief of the Air Staff announced to its Chairman that, on information from his subordinates, he must now admit that his earlier statement had contravened a principle to which his Department attached great importance, and that no contingent for the expeditionary force could now be found from the 52 squadrons.^{(19)*} In this major respect, therefore, the recommendations concerning the Air Force were a dead letter from the start.

In addition the Committee pointed out a further problem for which they felt themselves unable to do more than hint at a solution. It was made clear that the air defences of Britain, both on the ground and in the air, were designed so far to give protection only to London, Southern England and most of the South Midlands. If those defences were to be expanded to cover the North as well, then a further 25 squadrons would be needed, together with appropriate ground defences. The most serious difficulty in such an extension of the scheme was the limited power of expansion of the R.A.F. in peace-time conditions. Neither training establishments, nor accommodation for squadrons when formed, would be adequate for such an increase. In any case, this expansion could hardly be included among the 'worst deficiencies' since it had never before been suggested, and the Committee did no more than point to the problem leaving it to the Cabinet to provide a solution.

The cost of the whole recommended deficiency programme outlined above was estimated at £82 million, of which £71 million was to be spent during the first five years. This represented, in the Committee's view, a balanced programme of equipment for all three fighting Services, taking into account the country's resources and the enemies likely to attack her. Finally, the Committee argued that 'moral disarmament' of the population should be ranked not least among the 'worst deficiencies'. As a result of persistent and almost unopposed propaganda, it was claimed, the people of this country had deliberately allowed its defence forces to fall below 'the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement of common action by international obligations'; in this frame of mind the people of Britain would be shocked by the announcement of a large defence programme, and the Cabinet must consider how best to mitigate the effects of that shock. Although they made no specific mention of it, the Committee may well have been impressed by the

* The number of squadrons mentioned in this context varied in the discussions during the winter of 1933 and the spring of 1934, sometimes being as low as 11; but the variations themselves illustrate how unsatisfactory the calculations were.

result of the by-election at East Fulham in October 1933. On that occasion the Labour candidate, fighting on a programme of continued disarmament and support for the system of collective security, had converted a previous Conservative majority of 14,000 into a Labour majority of more than 4,000 votes. There can be little doubt that, in this particular respect, the mood of East Fulham represented that of much of the country. At this period *The Times* was advocating a policy of revision of the peace treaties,⁽²⁰⁾ a policy for which it found active support in the House of Commons.⁽²¹⁾ And, in the minds of many, disarmament and revisionism were complementary policies. No account of the process of rearmament in Great Britain in the nineteen-thirties would be remotely correct unless it stressed, at the outset, the enormous obstacle of public unwillingness. That mood of anti-militarism which had spread over the country since 1919 was less a reasoned, intellectual conviction of the possibility of peace by international co-operation than an emotional repugnance to the horrors and privations of war, a repugnance which had been immeasurably strengthened by the later distress of unemployment. Against this, no government could proceed quickly. At this stage, when not politicians but their technical advisers alone were concerned, it is important to see that even they realised that public opinion would be shocked by the revelation of what was required to place Britain's defences on a reasonably secure footing, and admitted that 'the greatest care will be necessary to educate the nation as to the reasons for the heavy financial outlay involved'.

2. *The Last Stages of the Geneva Disarmament Conference,
November 1933-May 1934*

The Cabinet first considered the report of the D.R.C. on 7th March 1934.⁽²²⁾ Two months later on 2nd May, and after some discussion not so much of the detailed terms of the report as of its broad political and financial implications, the Cabinet referred the report to the Ministerial Committee on Disarmament.⁽²³⁾ They finally received back the report from the Ministerial Committee and gave their approval to the amended form of the programme on the last day of July.⁽²⁴⁾ It had, of course, always been understood that what the committee of experts, i.e. the D.R.C., recommended as best from a technical point of view would have to be reconsidered by the Cabinet. But the delay of five months was something more than normal and needs some explanation here. It cannot be explained simply by the need to examine the cost of the programme in detail, although that had to be done and was bound to take time.

The fundamental reason for delay lay in the fact that His Majesty's Government still remained committed, both at home and at

Geneva, to the cause of disarmament. That cause had both changed in detail and become much more complicated since the withdrawal of Germany from the Disarmament Conference in October 1933. On 22nd November, the Conference decided that Germany's withdrawal from its deliberations made further work at Geneva, at any rate for the time being, unlikely to produce results and concluded that the next few months should be devoted to efforts to solve outstanding difficulties through normal diplomatic channels. The decisive difficulty, as we have already seen, was the clear difference of view between France and Germany, the latter demanding the agreement of the Powers to some immediate rearmament on her part, the former refusing to enter any such agreement, or to disarm in any degree herself, until some means of armaments supervision of proved efficacy had been devised. In the weeks that followed, Great Britain, and to some extent Italy also, played the part of 'honest brokers'; with their help both Germany and France put forward their proposals for agreed rearmament, or security, or both. These negotiations, however, made no progress. By the middle of January 1934, His Majesty's Government had come to the conclusion that some measure of immediate German rearmament was inevitable—in any case, it was taking place—and that the choice lay between German rearmament according to an agreed plan or continued unilateral action by Germany which much eventually produce a general armaments race. Already, on 27th November 1933, Mr. Baldwin had forecast this conclusion in the House of Commons.⁽²⁵⁾ Now on 29th January 1934 it was embodied in a public statement which sought to provide a basis for further diplomatic efforts. 'His Majesty's Government', it was stated, 'do not hesitate to declare that the principle of equality of rights is no less essential in the matter of armaments than the principle of security—both must have their practical application if international agreement about armaments is to be reached'.⁽²⁶⁾ The White Paper then went on to discuss detailed proposals concerning effectives and armaments, involving additions for Germany and reductions for other powers, and methods of consultation, and ended by claiming that the return of Germany to the League of Nations was an essential condition of any agreement. Thereupon Mr. Eden, Lord Privy Seal, visited Paris, Rome and Berlin during the second half of February to discuss these proposals further.

In several respects the British proposals did not go far enough for Germany or for France. Among other things Herr Hitler insisted that Germany should have a larger air force immediately. Again, it soon became clear that, whatever the fluctuations of opinion within the French Cabinet, French opinion generally was steadfast on the need for adequate guarantees for the execution of any arms

convention, and highly suspicious of the extent to which Great Britain would commit herself to help in restoring order in the event of a breach of such a convention.⁽²⁷⁾

The Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, arguing that it was unlikely that either side would give way, and pointing out that a complete breakdown of the Disarmament Conference and its connected negotiations would mean a return to pre-war conditions of competitive rearmament, gave it as his view that failure could be avoided only if Britain made greater concessions to meet the French demand for security, and, on this basis, then reached agreement on the German demand for a substantial air force.⁽²⁸⁾ In the House of Commons, also, he stated that Britain's views and actions on 'security' would probably decide the fate of any proposed agreement at Geneva, an admission which no more than summed up an obvious and powerful sentiment in the House itself.⁽²⁹⁾ On 19th March the French Government replied officially to the British plan. The reply made it clear that in no circumstances would France agree to that simultaneous reduction of French and increase of German armaments which the British plan implied, and stated categorically that all such matters of detail were 'completely dominated by the essential problem of guarantees of execution'.⁽³⁰⁾

Before the end of the month the German Government made their attitude clear, and any chance of compromise still less likely, by publishing their estimates for the forthcoming financial year, including an increase of 350 million Reichsmarks on defence above the corresponding total for the preceding year. On 17th April the French Government announced in a Note to London that all diplomatic negotiations, whether for an arms convention, or on the subject of guarantees of execution, were at an end.

'Before even enquiring', so the Note ran, 'whether an agreement could be reached on a system of guarantees of execution for a convention legalising German rearmament, France must put in the forefront of its pre-occupations the condition of her own security from which, moreover, she does not separate the security of other interested Powers. The return of Germany to the League of Nations was a condition insisted upon by both France and Britain and would be indispensable to realise a satisfactory system of guarantees of execution, yet Hitler is not prepared to promise this. It is an essential and necessary condition. Consequently the French Note regrets that the negotiations pursued by France and Britain have been so roughly broken by German action. There is nothing to be done but to invite the Disarmament Conference to take up its work again'.⁽³¹⁾

At this point His Majesty's Government, and the Italian Government also, had no alternative but to agree to the French decision

to refer back the whole armaments problem to the Disarmament Conference, leaving the Conference to resume again on 29th May 1934 exactly where it had left off in October 1933.

During these weeks the Cabinet repeatedly discussed the various possible courses open to them. These ranged from some form of independent agreement with Germany, through all manner of Franco-German compromises, to an out-and-out alliance with the French based on the assumption that German promises could not be relied upon and that the tradition of Anglo-French co-operation was far too valuable a weapon to be discarded.⁽³²⁾ While opinion showed no clear sign of attaching itself to either extreme, there was now some slight balance in favour of making further security assurances to France. But this balance was in no way decisive, and on 9th May the Cabinet decided that, apart from the Draft Convention of 1933 and the proposals of January 1934, His Majesty's Government were not in a position to offer any further constructive proposals to be put forward at Geneva.⁽³³⁾ If France asked for further security discussions she must take the lead; such discussions could fruitfully take place only with Germany present and must therefore be held outside the Disarmament Conference. Despite objections, voiced now as they had been earlier on, that if the British Government threw in its hand as mediator then all hope of an armaments agreement would vanish, the Government publicly stated their conclusion, in a debate in the House on 18th May 1934, that any fresh initiative at Geneva must come from others.⁽³⁴⁾ On the other hand, both in their private deliberations and in debate in the House, the Government also suggested that, even were the Conference at Geneva to break down, they—and other Governments, too, it was hoped—would then immediately start new efforts for the same purpose,⁽³⁵⁾ this time in the form of a special agreement for the limitation of air armaments. In more exact terms, what the Government had in mind was an Air Convention consisting of an undertaking by the various States of Europe 'that, if anyone should violate the Convention by dropping bombs . . . the whole of the air forces of European States would be employed against them'.⁽³⁶⁾

3. *The Cabinet and the first D.R.C. Report, May-July 1934*

(a) *The Air Force*

All this time the Cabinet had, in effect, postponed any serious and detailed investigation of the recommendations of the D.R.C. Discussions on that report, which had begun early in March, were soon diverted into negotiations about security and sanctions connected with the main stream of efforts to secure a compromise between the

conflicting views of France and Germany on international disarmament. By the end of April some members of the Cabinet were urging that too much time had already been spent on these delaying tactics.⁽³⁷⁾ On 2nd May the Cabinet at last decided to give the report due consideration by referring it to the Ministerial Committee on Disarmament.⁽³⁸⁾* That Committee, after one or two general and inconclusive discussions on the policy of sending an expeditionary force to the Continent and on the size of the R.A.F., asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Chamberlain, in consultation with the Service Departments, to prepare a revised estimate of costs for the whole programme, this time with full regard to political and financial considerations. Already there were signs of opinion hardening against an expeditionary force, and in favour of a much larger R.A.F. programme than had been originally suggested.⁽³⁹⁾ It was freely admitted that, for the sake of placating public opinion, some definite recommendation should soon be made about air development, even if other matters were to take longer; and there was a political, if not a Service consensus of opinion that, within any further programme of development of the R.A.F., public opinion would be satisfied only by a clear increase of squadrons for home rather than overseas defence.⁽⁴⁰⁾

It was, indeed, aircraft programmes which now occupied the forefront not only in official discussions but also in public debate. For some time past it had been increasingly evident that, in these matters, public opinion in this country was divided between those who, from fear of the consequences of the bombing of civilian populations were anxious to abolish the bomber, and those who, from the same fear, were anxious to provide this country with an air force at least equal to any likely to attack it. The first view, in a variety of forms, was put forward repeatedly by the British Government to the Disarmament Conference at Geneva. It appeared in a White Paper on Declaration of British Disarmament Policy, in July 1932;⁽⁴¹⁾ it appeared again in the British Draft Convention of March 1933;⁽⁴²⁾ on 10th November 1932, Mr. Baldwin told the House of Commons he had for some time been convinced 'that if it were possible the Air Forces ought all to be abolished', and all civil aviation controlled.⁽⁴³⁾ While it is true that the Government's proposals varied from time to time and frequently included details short of the complete abolition of all bombing, yet it is equally true that, throughout 1932 and 1933, the Government repeatedly moved towards the extreme of complete abolition in its anxiety to get some agreement at Geneva, while it was just as repeatedly warned by the

* D.C.(M). The members of this Committee were: Neville Chamberlain, Thomas, Eyres-Monsell, Hailsham, Londonderry, Eden, Cunliffe-Lister, Halifax, Runciman, Ormsby-Gore, Hankey (Secretary).

Air Staff, strongly backed by the Secretary of State for Air, that any such abolition agreement would provide an illusion of security insofar as the civil population was concerned.⁽⁴⁴⁾ There was an interesting example of this divergence of view at a Cabinet meeting in May 1932. On that occasion the Cabinet reluctantly approved a report of a technical sub-committee of the C.I.D. which advised against 'the proposed prohibition of the act of bombing on the territory and shipping of another Sovereign State'. This advice was based upon the disadvantages for national and imperial defence argued by the technical experts to be implicit in any such prohibition. At the same time, however, the Cabinet expressed their disappointment at the comparative ineffectiveness of the proposals for disarmament so far submitted to them. They therefore went on to express general agreement with suggestions earlier made by the Lord President of the Council, Mr. Baldwin, in favour of the entire suppression of naval and military air forces combined with restrictions on civil aviation.⁽⁴⁵⁾ In fact, nothing along these lines was achieved either now or later, though the dream lingered on. All that happened was that the lesser issue of the abolition or control of military aircraft cut clean across the original and major issue at stake at Geneva, viz. some general agreement upon the reduction and limitation of all armaments.

In the meantime, at home, awareness of Britain's inferiority in the air and the demand for 'parity' increased. This was made evident at least as early as the debate on the Air Estimates on 8th March 1934.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Introducing the estimates the Under-Secretary of State for Air noted 'a modest upward trend', two new squadrons for home defence and four for the R.A.F. as a whole. He went on to claim that since other nations were providing increased funds for air armaments then this country must do likewise, for the Government was determined 'that this country must, so long as air forces exist, have parity in the air'.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Parity was not defined. Criticising the proposals as inadequate, Mr. Churchill claimed that only in immediate parity, and by that he meant numerical equality, lay security, since among equals the uselessness of aggression becomes apparent.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In reply, the Lord President of the Council, Mr. Baldwin, claimed that it was still the desire of the Government to bring about an air convention based upon restrictions and equality, and then ended with words that became headlines. 'In conclusion, I say that if all our efforts fail, . . . then any Government of this country—a National Government more than any, and this Government—will see to it that in air strength and air power this country shall no longer be in a position inferior to any country within striking distance of our shores.'⁽⁴⁹⁾

This was not, however, the first occasion on which Mr. Baldwin

had made it clear that parity, or the one-power standard, was no longer to be seen largely in the context of negotiated disarmament, and that it might well now have to be treated in the quite different context of increasing military forces and expenditure. Addressing a Conservative Party meeting at Birmingham on 6th October 1933, he said that disarmament was not something for one country only. 'I mean,' he said, 'the limitation of armaments as a real limitation . . . and if we find ourselves on a lower rating and that some other country has higher figures, that country has to come down and we have to go up until we meet.'⁽⁵⁰⁾

The D.R.C. review which ended only a few days before the March 1934 debate, had, as we have seen, revealed similar doubts about our strength in the air, even on the basis of its own recommendations.* Those doubts had been repeated in the early and inconclusive discussions of the Ministerial Committee which had, in particular, emphasised the need for a still larger air programme in order to placate public opinion and, as part of that argument, a programme increasingly devoted to home defence against attack from the Continent.⁽⁵¹⁾

This point of view found clear expression when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Chamberlain, reported back to the Ministerial Committee, during the last week in June, on the broad economic and political implications of the D.R.C. programme and how far the programme should be amended in the light of those implications. The Chancellor made three broad assumptions. First, the return of the country to normal financial conditions was still so beset with difficulty that it was impossible to afford all that had been recommended, and Ministers must therefore decide on priorities. For example, the cost in a full year of the concessions made in the recent Budget would be £9 million; no Sinking Fund had yet been allowed for; and the restoration of the remainder of the cuts of 1931 and the remission of extra taxation imposed then would, again in a full year, cost the Treasury some £40 million. Second, since the anxieties of the British people were now concentrated on Europe rather than on the Far East and, in Europe, on a rearming Germany, Britain's initial efforts in rearmament should be devoted to measures designed for the defence of these islands. Third, the chief danger from Germany was in the air. The best defence for this purpose was a powerful air force based upon this country and, as a second and long-term line of defence, an Army capable of helping to protect the Low Countries and thus provide defence in depth.⁽⁵²⁾ It should be realised, however, that this last suggestion concerning the Army was completely different from that of the D.R.C. report. In the latter it

* See above, p. 98.

had been assumed that speed of mobilisation was of fundamental importance and that the Army would be used abroad from the outset of hostilities; in the Chancellor's plan, mobilisation would follow at a leisurely pace while it was first seen how the air battle developed.

Discussion in the Ministerial Committee immediately centred on the air proposals, and they were the first to result in both a definite decision and a public announcement.⁽⁵³⁾ The air recommendations of the D.R.C., although limited to the unambitious programme of 52 squadrons for home and European defence, i.e. a deficiency programme properly so-called, had made generous provision for working and war reserves. The Chancellor's proposals, on the other hand, recommended a much larger increase for home defence—38 instead of 10 extra squadrons—and, as a saving, made no further provision for fleet aircraft and none for war reserves. The Secretary of State for Air, Lord Londonderry, condemned the Chancellor's plan as 'being better designed for public consumption than for real utility',⁽⁵⁴⁾ chiefly on the ground that it made so little provision for reserves.⁽⁵⁵⁾ It should be remembered that, both now and later, the policy of 'window-dressing' was designed not only to reassure the public at home but also to 'inspire respect in the mind of a possible enemy', in other words a policy of deterrence.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The Air Ministry had suggested a plan of its own based on considerations of the German rate of rearmament over the next ten years, and it was clear from the start that the Secretary of State for Air was not to be convinced of the wisdom of the Chancellor's plan. A compromise was therefore reached. This was a programme divided into two parts. First, the addition of 33 squadrons for Home Defence in the years 1934-39, bringing the total for that purpose to 75 squadrons instead of 52. Second, a programme of reserves to be completed during the years 1939-42. There were to be 8 further squadrons for service with the Fleet Air Arm and overseas.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This compromise favoured one side more than the other—clearly the Chancellor's—and those views which had led the Chancellor both to increase the air proposals of the original report and to insist on devoting as large as possible a share of the national preparations to immediate and numerical display. On one occasion towards the end of these discussions the Lord President of the Council said that for political reasons there must be an early decision on the air proposals, partly because air expansion 'was regarded by members of the Cabinet as something in the nature of a gesture to Europe and especially to Germany', and partly for home consumption 'to do something to satisfy the semi-panic conditions which existed now about the Air'.⁽⁵⁸⁾ It is not clear that all members of the Cabinet would have agreed with Mr. Baldwin's estimate of 'semi-panic conditions', but

it is clear that they were united in admitting the great strength of public opinion and its political importance. The final Cabinet statement on the D.R.C. proposals pointed out that—

‘Although currents of more or less uninformed public opinion at home ought never to be a determining factor in defensive preparations, they have to be reckoned with in asking Parliament to approve a programme of expenditure. In the present case it happened that the general trend of public opinion appeared to coincide with our own views as to the desirability of a considerable expansion of the R.A.F. for home defence.’*⁽⁵⁹⁾

These were undoubtedly the motives that determined the form of the first major expansion of the Royal Air Force, and which changed a deficiency plan into a rearmament programme.

This programme was approved without serious question by the Cabinet on 18th July 1934,⁽⁶⁰⁾ and announced briefly to the House of Commons on the following day.⁽⁶¹⁾ In a full debate in the House on 30th July,⁽⁶²⁾ Mr. Baldwin justified the air rearmament programme—and only the air proposals were publicly announced and discussed—partly on the ground that the Disarmament Conference had failed, and partly because other nations were increasing their own air forces. He admitted that the present proposals would ‘not bring us up to full parity’, but claimed that they would enable the country to play its part in the general system of collective security. No indication was given of the speed of the programme during the allotted five years and no information which might draw forth criticisms of ‘window-dressing’ such as had been made in the Ministerial Committee. On the other hand, Mr. Baldwin claimed that what was proposed was only what was absolutely necessary, and reminded Members that ‘since the day of the air, the old frontiers are gone. When you think of the defence of England you no longer think of the chalk cliffs of Dover; you think of the Rhine’. The Government was opposed by the Opposition on the ground that increased air armaments were unnecessary if international arrangements for collective security were properly employed, and also by others who, like Mr. Churchill, argued that the present proposals were inadequate in comparison with what was being done by other countries. In particular, Mr. Churchill argued that the German rate of increase was so much greater than the British that in 1936, Germany would be ‘definitely and substantially stronger in the air than Great Britain’, even if the present proposals were carried out.⁽⁶³⁾† At the end of the debate the Government defeated the Opposition motion of censure by 404 votes to 60.

* See also above, pp. 96-99.

† For further discussion on estimates of German air strength see below, Chap. V.

Before going on to those sections of the D.R.C Report and Ministerial discussion dealing with proposals for the Army and the Navy it is worth looking a little further at two aspects of the debate which relate particularly to the R.A.F. programme. The first concerns some differences of view which emerged between the Air Ministry and Air Staff on the one hand and the general trend of Ministerial opinion on the other. 'Differences of view' is a better description than 'quarrels'; the latter did not occur and, indeed, how could they when the R.A.F. was faced with such unexpected generosity on the part of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The differences which were disclosed concerned both ends and means. Broadly speaking the R.A.F.—at least in these particular discussions—was both more cautious about the speed and extent of expansion than the Ministers and less exclusively concerned with the demands of home defence. It could be argued that the R.A.F., at this stage, was if not complacent then perhaps less inspired by a sense of urgency than were some Ministers. It is true that the Air Staff at first adopted the 'deficiency' approach literally and for them the deficiency to be remedied was the shortfall on the long approved 52-squadron plan.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Even when pressed to be more ambitious they changed their views only gradually. As late as May 1934 the C.A.S., Sir Edward Ellington, argued that 62 squadrons would be enough for the R.A.F. in 1939, on the assumption that the German Air Force would be no larger than that of France by then, that France and the Low Countries would be fighting with Britain and that the airfields in the Low Countries would be denied to the enemy.⁽⁶⁵⁾ This latter assumption was a critical one and figured more prominently in Air Staff memoranda at this stage than it sometimes did later on.⁽⁶⁶⁾

But this reluctance to press for a sudden spurt in the growth of the R.A.F. was not simply due to strategic calculations. The Air Staff were sceptical about their ability to produce crews with adequate training, or the necessary reserves, with the industrial facilities and time available. They envisaged war against Germany starting with a severe air attack on London accompanied by a German invasion of the Low Countries. Such operations might last for three or four weeks followed by a phase of reduced activity in which reserves of aircrews must be highly trained in order to maximise efficiency and minimise losses.⁽⁶⁷⁾ What all this demanded was a process of slow growth in peace-time to provide a sure basis for the necessarily more rapid expansion once war began. Here, again, it is not difficult to detect Trenchard's profound influence. And those who regarded the C.A.S. in 1934 and his deputy, Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt (later A.O.C. in C. Bomber Command) as ultra-conservative were in effect criticising a well established Service

tradition and not merely the thinking habits of two men. In any case, since the Air Staff expected their German counterparts to be aware of the main outlines of Britain's development plans, and to look at air strategy from a very similar standpoint, then they had to conclude that the Germans would be well aware of the weaknesses of 'window dressing' and then less likely to be deterred if they themselves were well provided with reserves of men and machines.

Finally, in this particular context, there were occasions when the Air Staff, with support from some Ministers, urged upon the Cabinet the needs of both non-European defence and of the Fleet Air Arm. But here, too, as in the matter of reserves, it was substantially the different Ministerial view which was embodied in the new programme announced to Parliament.

A second interesting aspect of this first major debate on new defence plans was the evidence it provided of divergent views between Ministers themselves and also between their official advisers. It should be said straightaway that there were no well defined, exclusive groups; those who differed over some details could well agree over others. Among officials it seems that Sir Robert Vansittart of the Foreign Office and Sir Warren Fisher of the Treasury wanted an emphasis on air power from the beginning and the former was already urging Ministers to take the German menace more seriously.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the Cabinet and the C.I.D. is more difficult to pin down except that he, more than the other two, emphasised the needs of the Navy and of Far Eastern defence. Among the Chiefs of Staff there were differences although not, as far as the paper record goes, violent ones. The C.I.G.S., General Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, argued against the assumption that Germany would open the war with a massive air attack on London and claimed that, according to the evidence at his disposal, the German air force would be used mainly in a tactical support role for the army.⁽⁶⁹⁾ But then, the C.I.G.S. and the C.N.S., Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, were neither convinced of the value of bombing as a war winning weapon nor, as they made clear a year later, persuaded that bombing of open towns and civilians was a legitimate method of waging war.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Among Ministers the Secretary of State for War, Lord Hailsham, and the First Lord, Sir Bolton Eyres Monsell, were opposed to the 'favouritism' being shown to the Air Force but otherwise had little in common. While Ministers, generally, were for priority for air rearmament, they varied in their emphasis on the importance of both 'parity' and deterrence and also in the degree to which the danger from Germany dominated their thinking. On this last point Mr. Chamberlain differed to some extent from Mr. Baldwin, Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden. But these were not serious differences of

principle. Perhaps the most interesting feature at Cabinet level was the relatively minor part played in these discussions by Mr. MacDonald, the Prime Minister. Far more important were Mr. Baldwin, Lord President and the Prime Minister's virtual deputy, and Mr. Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is sometimes argued that Mr. Baldwin was both more moderate than the Chancellor in wanting less emphatic stress on the R.A.F. and home defence and that he, in practice, moderated the effect of Mr. Chamberlain's views.⁽⁷¹⁾ But in the matter of deterrent 'shop-window dressing' the two were close together; moreover, when Baldwin had his opportunity, in early July, to by-pass Chamberlain by means of a small *ad-hoc* sub-committee on the allocation of air forces, he came back with a modified scheme very little different from that already produced by the Chancellor.⁽⁷²⁾ In this, as in other matters, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Chamberlain was the strong man of the party and eventually got most of his own way.⁽⁷³⁾

(b) *The Army*

To complete the story of the report of the D.R.C. to the point at which it was finally accepted by the Cabinet it is necessary to consider the proposals concerning the Army and the Navy. Here, again, it is worth considering only general principles, though they, once more, do clearly illustrate some differences of view between Services advisers and Ministers and the broad assumptions by which each were moved.

And first the Army. In the view of those who drew up the original D.R.C. Report the most important Army deficiency, in the event of a war with Germany, lay in the suggested arrangements for an expeditionary force for the defence of the Low Countries. They argued that the independence of the Low Countries, which for centuries had been regarded as vital to Britain's safety, was now not less but more important with the development of air power. Put more specifically, the integrity of Holland and Belgium had become of increased importance in that it provided 'that depth in our defence of London which is so badly needed, and of which our geographical position will otherwise deprive us. If the Low Countries were in the hands of a hostile Power, not only would the frequency and intensity of air attack on London be increased, but the whole of the industrial areas of the Midlands and North of England would be brought within the area of penetration of hostile air attacks'.⁽⁷⁴⁾ This was a point of view the Chiefs of Staff stressed repeatedly.⁽⁷⁵⁾ And yet, by existing arrangements, all that Britain's present resources permitted her to aim at was nothing better than to place in the field single

divisions in each of the first two months of a war, a third at the end of the fourth month, and the remaining two divisions at the end of the sixth month. The report therefore recommended that the Army should be capable of putting into the field within one month of the outbreak of war a fully equipped Regular expeditionary force of one cavalry division, four infantry divisions, two air defence brigades and one tank brigade. Reinforcement from the Territorial Army could only be considered later. But even this force ready for immediate use, it was argued, would act as a deterrent to an aggressor and as an influence for peace out of all proportion to its size. The capital cost of completing the equipment of a force of this size during the next five years, and of then having it ready for mobilisation at the end of one month, was reckoned at about £25,500,000 out of a total deficiency bill for the Army, in the same period of £40 million. It represented the largest single item in the Report. While omitting, and openly so, the whole problem of adequate reinforcements for an army of this size, this part of the report was a simple re-affirmation of a long-standing strategic principle of national defence and an admission of what observance of that principle would cost. It provided an early test case of the Government's willingness to admit and prepare for the worst possibilities in a darkening European scene, and to face the unpopularity of telling the electorate what was needed.

From the beginning, the plan for an expeditionary force to assist in preventing Germany from over-running the Low Countries met with opposition. Could such a plan be made effective without prior talks with the Belgians, and almost certainly with the French and, in that case, would this not be a one-sided interpretation of Britain's commitments under Locarno? Should there not be talks with Germany also if the proper Locarno spirit was to be observed?⁽⁷⁶⁾ Another and, at this time, less explicit source of opposition was more clearly strategic in its implications. This was the belief that Britain's resources should be devoted mainly to the Air Force and the Navy and that, though the Army should be maintained for use in other parts of the world, it should not be regarded as an important weapon for use in a European war.⁽⁷⁷⁾ Here lay the seeds of that conception of war of 'limited liability' which dominated English strategic planning between 1936 and 1938, and which gave way to different views only under the impact of Munich and its consequences.

At a meeting of the Ministerial Committee on 15th May 1934, in face of general agreement that the integrity of Belgium—however secured—was of vital importance to the strategic interests of the United Kingdom, the problem arose of how to guarantee that integrity. At this point the objection was made, for the first time in

these discussions, that peace-time arrangements by means of Staff talks would probably be regarded both by the public at home and by the governments of other countries as an admission of an alliance, and could hardly be regarded as consistent with Britain's obligations under Locarno unless similar plans were discussed with Germany. Out of this impasse arose a suggestion that there might be some value in a public declaration by H.M. Government that they would regard any threat to Belgian territory as a threat to Britain's own interests. No decision was reached.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Two days later, however, the Belgian Government themselves went a stage further. At an interview with the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for War on 17th May, the Belgian Foreign Minister, M. Hymans, in view of the dangers presented by German rearmament, asked His Majesty's Government to supplement what he described as the 'repressive' guarantee of Belgian territory given at Locarno by what he called a 'preventive' guarantee. Under Locarno Britain promised, among other things, to guarantee Belgium against Germany, while reserving the right to judge in each case whether the circumstances required the fulfilment of the guarantee. The Belgian Foreign Minister now asked Britain to strengthen this guarantee by agreeing to apply an automatic test (i.e. actual invasion) thereby giving up the freedom of judgment which Locarno originally secured. By not mentioning invasion by Germany specifically, this new guarantee would theoretically apply to all of Belgium's neighbours; but the omission was simply to avoid giving offence to Germany, not because France, Luxembourg or the Netherlands were in any way suspect. 'It is precisely,' explained Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, 'because for all practical purposes the barrier created by the demilitarised Rhineland is felt to be doomed, that the Belgian Government wish to strengthen their own immediate frontier by a fresh British guarantee'. It was further assumed that M. Hymans would like to see the guarantee reinforced by 'some measure of contact between the British and Belgian General Staffs'.

Ministers then went on to debate the relative merits of a new guarantee, as just described, and those of a declaration to be given to the Belgian Ambassador and confirmed in the House of Commons.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Such a declaration would simply be a clarification of the Locarno engagement, emphasising that if Britain did have to help Belgium she would come to her assistance with all her power. For most Ministers a declaration was clearly the more acceptable method. But, even then, two complications remained. The first was that Herr Hitler had recently confirmed his willingness to consider favourably something in the nature of a non-aggression pact with Belgium which, although it would not add anything legally to

Germany's obligations under Locarno, might make the way easier for some declaration or treaty of the sort Belgium wanted from Britain. The difficulty here was so to time the two as to avoid the appearance of competition or bargaining. The second complication was that it was impossible to separate the consequences of a declaration, viz., a rearmament programme, from the declaration itself. If the declaration were made first, then rearmament would appear as a consequence of it. Far better to do the two together. And no declaration could be of much value without consequent Staff talks.*

The Cabinet, when the whole problem was referred to them by the Ministerial Committee, agreed that the defence of Belgian territory against foreign aggression was a vital British interest which must, in case of need, be actively sustained, and that this should be made known at an early occasion.⁽⁸¹⁾ But they also asked that there should be some prior enquiry into the overall strategic implications. It was at this point that the whole plan broke down. It became clear first, that no purely Anglo-Belgian arrangement could be made practicable without some form of communication with the French e.g. concerning the use of ports of disembarkation; and second, and much more important, no Anglo-Belgian force could possibly hope to withstand a German invasion of Belgium on its own, even assuming that Britain provided efficient and well-balanced fighting forces such as those recommended in the report of the D.R.C. The armed assistance of France was vital to the whole plan. 'We have never in the past', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'engaged in a Continental war single-handed, nor do the modern developments in armies and their weapons render it any more possible for us to do so in the future. To attempt to oppose the army of a great continental Power, with the assistance of Belgium alone, would be to shoulder a burden that, in view of our world-wide commitments, would be altogether beyond our capacity'.⁽⁸²⁾

On examining the reports of the enquiries they had instigated the Cabinet decided, after all, that 'the time was inopportune for a resounding Declaration of our concern in the integrity of Belgian territory'.⁽⁸³⁾ Some immediate reasons were given for this. First, that it would offend the French were Britain to make a unilateral declaration about Belgium when they, the French, had just been persuaded to avoid a similar kind of move in connection with their own proposed Eastern Mutual Guarantee Pact. Second, that the

* In the official account of this discussion by Ministers⁽⁸⁰⁾ only the defence of Belgium is discussed in detail, and that is approximately what happened during Cabinet and Committee discussions on the Low Countries at this point. But Holland was not ignored. The defence of Holland was considered as only second in importance to that of Belgium, and was not discussed in detail partly because the Belgian Government was itself making overtures at this point whereas the Dutch Government was not, and partly because the Chiefs of Staff considered that Germany was less likely to invade Holland than Belgium.

events of 30th June in Germany* indicated a weakening of the régime there which made it unlikely that she would embark on aggressive action in the near future. A third and more general argument was that, as had been demonstrated by the Chiefs of Staff, any such declaration must involve a tripartite arrangement including France. Should France refuse to come in or should she depend simply on a defensive strategy on her eastern frontier, then Germany might use Britain's declaration to pick a quarrel with her alone. The question of French participation was the crucial issue. And while it was argued that the French were unlikely to participate at this point, there was also no indication of a clear wish to persuade them to do so. All that happened, therefore, was that in a speech in the House of Commons on 13th July the Foreign Secretary, discussing the French plan for an Eastern Locarno, slipped in an unobtrusive statement to the effect that the integrity of Belgium remained, as it always had been, of vital interest to the safety of Great Britain. Nothing was said of Britain's determination to defend Belgian territory or of the means necessary to do so.⁽⁸⁴⁾

These inconclusive discussions formed the prelude to one of those cases of an acknowledgment of a national strategic interest, coupled with an unwillingness to pay the price of defending that interest, which occur more than once in this period. For, as the Chiefs of Staff had insisted without denial from any quarter, Britain's overwhelming strategic interest in Belgium remained whether she made a declaration or not, and this interest could be protected, if Germany invaded Belgium, only by the use of land as well as air forces. And the Ministerial Committee, in their final report to the Cabinet at the end of July 1934 on the revision of the report of the D.R.C. in terms of current political and economic considerations, admitted that they also had been forced to the same conclusion. 'In deciding whether or not we should have an Expeditionary Force for use in the Low Countries, the question is not whether we should intervene, but whether we should be capable of intervention. We consider that, in the interest of our own defence, we should be capable of this'.⁽⁸⁵⁾ The need having been admitted, the military means to satisfy it—judged by the standards of the Government's professional advisers—were then promptly denied.

While the enquiry into a declaration about Belgium had been going on, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Neville Chamberlain issued his revised form of the whole of the original Report programme.† In a letter, a little later, he admitted that 'the reactions of my colleagues to my Defence proposals were as I expected very

* i.e. the purge of the S.A. including the killing of many of Hitler's former close associates.

† See above, p. 103.

unfavourable. I pitched the note on purpose a little high and I don't at present despair of ultimately getting most of what I want'.⁽⁸⁶⁾ On the one hand, he agreed that if an enlarged air force failed to act as a deterrent to an aggressor, it would eventually become necessary for Britain to defend the Low Countries on land to secure defence in depth; on the other, he recommended a startling reduction of proposed deficiency expenditure on the Army from £40 million to £19 million. In doing this he observed, firstly, that the larger sum suggested by the report of the D.R.C. could probably not be spent in the early years; and, secondly, that he could hardly believe it possible that Germany would 'be in a condition to wage war on the West within five years'.⁽⁸⁷⁾

The arguments of the Secretary of State for War, Lord Hailsham, in answer to this proposal were both cogent and, on purely strategic grounds, undenied. In the first place the deficiency programme for the Army was far from entirely dependent on the assumption that an expeditionary force would be needed to defend the Low Countries against Germany. The size of the British Army in peace was conditioned not by European commitments but by the necessity of having at home forces adequate to meet requirements overseas under the Cardwell system;⁽⁸⁸⁾ the term 'expeditionary force' had been introduced by Lord Haldane to cover the organisation, in the event of war, of such home forces as existed but whose primary object was the maintenance of overseas garrisons. Of course, if these forces were to be prepared for a war against Germany instead of operations under the more leisurely Defence of India Plan,* then both speed of mobilisation and standard of equipment would increase the cost. But, in any case, according to the view of Lord Milne, as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in 1933, the Army was deficient, to the extent of £30 million of various items designed even for the less costly Defence of India Plan, and that simply because of the loyal interpretation of the Ten Year Rule adopted by the War Office. By any standards, therefore, the Army was short of adequate reserves of ammunition, modern tanks and other equipment. In the second place, Lord Hailsham argued that the Chancellor, in common with all other Ministers and professional advisers concerned, had accepted the long-term possibility of a war against Germany and the need to prevent her from over-running the Low Countries. Therefore they admitted, by implication, the need for an Army equipped and ready for mobilisation on more ambitious lines than those already planned. Finally, if the Chancellor seriously based his proposed reduction of the Army total on the assumption that

* This was a plan drawn up by the Defence of India Sub-Committee, under the chairmanship of Lord Birkenhead, 1927-29.⁽⁸⁹⁾ See also below, Appendix II.

Germany would not be in a position to wage war in five years and that Britain's rate of deficiency programmes could consequently be slower than that recommended by the D.R.C., why were the requirements of the Royal Air Force being met not merely in full but with a substantial increase? The defence of Belgium, and it could only be defended in the long run on land, was closely linked with the strategic necessities of air warfare; for both German attacks upon this country and our attacks upon Germany would be vitally affected by the possession of airfields in the Low Countries. In other words, the Chancellor's proposals, if accepted, must upset the balance in a carefully planned scheme for the simultaneous use of all three Services in the kind of war which the Government's professional advisers thought most likely to happen.^{(90)*}

The answers to these criticisms did not come from the Chancellor alone, although he undoubtedly set the tone of the debate and the line which the Ministerial Committee and the Government ultimately followed. Out of thirteen Ministers who were present at these discussions the Secretary of State for War, Lord Hailsham, and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Bolton Eyres Monsell, alone attacked the cuts that were being imposed on them. The main line of defence of those who supported the Chancellor was that it was necessary, for purely financial reasons, 'to make some form of arbitrary cut in order to bring down the totals to a manageable size'.⁽⁹¹⁾ The cut was not intended, however, to deny the strategic plans upon which the report of the D.R.C was based, but simply to delay the completion of them for longer than five years. That delay could be justified on two grounds. In the first place, although Germany remained a potential menace, her recent domestic troubles gave hope that danger from her might be deferred. In the second place, a slower programme than that advocated by the original report was desirable in order that public opinion should not be offended too violently. To spend the full £40 million on the Army might necessitate an unpopular delay in removing burdens imposed in 1931, a delay which would be doubly unpopular if Ministers were correct in their argument that public opinion was firmly resolved against a second continental land war and therefore against expenditure on the Army for such a purpose. The Foreign Secretary even argued that the Government stood the risk of being defeated and thrown out unless it proceeded cautiously; public opinion could not be allowed to guide the Government but it must be treated with care. To the argument that it was illogical to get the Army and the

* The Chancellor of the Exchequer admitted the importance of Belgian airfields in the letter to his sister already quoted on p. 114; '... in the absence of security other nations won't give up aircraft or bombing and we shall be more likely to deter Germany from mad dogging if we have an air force which in case of need could bomb the Ruhr from Belgium'.

Air Force out of step in preparation for a war which, if it came, they must fight as one, the Chancellor replied that the proposed enlarged Air Force was to act as a deterrent to war on the part of Germany; only if the deterrent failed would the Army come into action, and it might, therefore, be regarded as a second line of defence.

In the end the Chancellor had his way. The Army was to get £20 million for its deficiency programme in the 5-year period ending March 1939, of which £12 million was to be for the expeditionary force, leaving a further £15,500,000 to be provided for this purpose in subsequent years. The rest of the Army total was to be devoted mostly to port defences, particularly at Singapore, and to ground defences for the Air Defence of Great Britain. The only concessions made to the Secretary of War were that this reduced total should not be made to cover the spread of air defence schemes to the midlands and north of Great Britain, and that the Army's needs, like those of the Navy and Air Force, should be reconsidered annually and treated differently if occasion arose.⁽⁹²⁾

(c) *The Navy*

Discussion of the naval proposals of the D.R.C., in the light of the Chancellor's counter-recommendations, was of considerable importance, partly because it coincided with preparatory discussions on the forthcoming Naval Conference, and partly because, since ship-building is a long-term process, discussion about naval programmes nearly always raised fundamental principles of strategy as well as short-term issues. As we have already seen, the broad strategic concept of naval warfare in the period after 1919 had been based upon what was called the 'One-Power Standard'.* Such a standard could be regarded by the Admiralty as satisfactory only if one major enemy was to be met at a time, and that condition was true of the years after 1919 when—with the United States of America omitted from the calculations—only Japan could be ranked as a major naval power. Moreover the capital ship terms of the Washington agreement gave Britain, for the time being, something approaching a two-power standard as against Japan and the strongest naval power in Europe.

But this situation did not last. Limited cruiser programmes in the years before the London Naval Conference of 1930, the acceptance, at that Conference, of a cruiser total well below the Admiralty's estimate of its absolute requirements, and the omission of France and Italy from the restrictive terms of 1930, all tended to alter the European and world naval position. The Admiralty considered, by 1934, that Britain's naval security had been seriously jeopardised.

* See above, Chapter I, Section 3.

The inadequacy of the one-power standard had now become clear. The despatch to the East of a fleet sufficient to meet that of Japan, combined with a distribution of cruisers to ensure the security of sea communications against Japanese attack, would leave Britain with a strength in European and home waters already inferior to that of the strongest European naval power—i.e. France.⁽⁹³⁾ The fact that it was Britain's policy to remain on good terms with France still left the French navy as the measure for the strength of the strongest European Naval Power; and who could prevent the emergence of a Power, hostile to Britain's interests, which took the naval strength of France as her own standard. The Admiralty, therefore, in its approach to the forthcoming naval conference of 1935, was in fact already planning for a two-power standard, a navy large enough to send a fleet to protect the Empire against attack by Japan in the Far East, while leaving in home waters sufficient forces to provide security against the strongest European naval Power. The financial implications of a two-power standard were clearly of a most serious nature. It was important, therefore, to appreciate the perhaps no less unpleasant alternatives should it be decided that the high cost of such a standard could not be met. The various alternatives were fully set out in an Admiralty memorandum prepared in March 1934.

'5. At the Washington Conference we agreed to parity in capital ship strength with the United States, which gave us practically a two-Power standard of strength as against Japan and the strongest naval Power in Europe. We definitely refused, at that time, to commit ourselves to any agreement as regards the strength of cruiser forces and light forces, because we knew that our demands, based on our special responsibilities, would not be agreed to. At that time, however, our strength in these forces in relation to those of Japan and the strongest European Power was satisfactory. The position is now profoundly changed. The superiority of our cruiser forces has been gradually lost in the last 12 years, and in the five years previous to the London Naval Conference, only 9 cruisers were ordered and future construction was most uncertain, so that when that Conference met our naval position was serious. In order to ensure a steady naval programme of cruisers for the ensuing 6 years, and to meet the American demand for parity in all classes of ships, the Admiralty agreed to what was strategically unsound in consideration of the ratio secured by Japan. The position was accentuated by the failure of France and Italy to associate themselves with Part III of the London Naval Treaty, with the result that France has been free to construct cruisers at her will, whereas we have been artificially limited. At the present time France has reached the formidable total of 54 cruisers, built and building, though many of them are small.

6. In the last 12 years our naval security has been seriously jeopardised, so that the despatch to the East of a fleet sufficient to meet that of Japan, combined with a distribution of cruisers to ensure the security of our sea communications against Japanese attack, would leave us with a strength in Europe and Home Waters definitely inferior to that of the strongest European naval power . . . It is therefore vital that the following question should be most carefully considered:

If we have to send out to the Far East an adequate fleet, how is our security in Home Waters to be obtained, and what is the minimum strength of our naval forces in those waters that can be accepted?

7. . . There are reasons why a long naval agreement is highly desirable and so our foreign policy must envisage, from the point of view of naval security, our relationships for a long time ahead. The standards of relative strengths agreed to in 1935, will bind us and determine our relative strengths in, say, 10 years' time.

8. If we are to accept definitely that it is an impossible financial task to build up a sufficient naval strength to face the strongest European Power when we are already engaged with Japan, that is a "Two-Power Standard", we must also accept the fact that the Admiralty cannot guarantee the security of our vital sea communications in Home Waters against attack by sea. It seems that we must either trust to a naval combination with some other Power to give us security at sea against such aggression, or we must keep the balance of our forces remaining in Europe sufficiently strong to prove an *effective deterrent* to any interference, namely a "One-Power Standard".

* * * * *

10. A naval combination with some other Power does not afford a basis for a standard of relative naval strength to be established by treaty, nor could His Majesty's Government, in the absence of our Main Fleet, confide the entire protection of this country, and its vital sea communications to a foreign navy. The naval dangers to which this country would be exposed are a seaborne raid, or loss of control of the home terminal area, which might result in a dangerous stoppage of our trade and supplies. If the balance of our forces is strong enough to guard against these dangers we should, so far as sea communications are concerned, be able to maintain this country for a period necessary to withdraw forces from the Far East and redispense them to meet the new situation and the greater danger. It must not be supposed, however, that we should be able then to provide protection for our territories and mercantile marine against Japanese attack. If the Government accept the situation stated at the beginning of paragraph 8, we cannot simultaneously fight Japan and the strongest European naval Power.

Final Assumption

11. It has been assumed, in this paper, therefore, that our minimum strategical requirement for security can be stated as follows:

We should be able to send to the Far East a fleet sufficient to provide "cover" against the Japanese fleet; we should have sufficient additional forces behind this shield for the protection of our territories and mercantile marine against Japanese attack; at the same time we should be able to retain in European waters a force sufficient to act as a deterrent and to prevent the strongest European naval Power from obtaining control of our vital home terminal areas while we can make the necessary redispersions.

It is on this strategical requirement that these proposals are based.

Foreign Office Comment on Part I (General Strategical Requirements for Security)

It may be assumed that, in the years covered by any future naval treaty, it would be the policy of His Majesty's Government with their eyes on dangers nearer home, to spare no pains to improve relations with Japan and to avoid possible causes of friction. Nevertheless, in the absence of any Cabinet ruling that the Admiralty will not be called upon to send a fleet to the Far East capable of engaging the Japanese fleet, the Naval Staff are clearly justified in basing upon the above premises their proposals for the 1935 Conference.⁹⁴*

These problems had been to some extent both realised and discussed by the D.R.C. during the previous autumn.⁹⁵ They were warned by the Chief of Naval Staff that the Navy at its present strength could no longer provide for war in the Far East and Europe at the same time,⁹⁶ and that 'real security for this country could be achieved only by a two-power naval standard—Japan and a European power'.⁹⁷ But, somehow, the full implications of all this in a time of known financial stringency were missed, and it is not altogether easy to explain why. To some extent, the fact that Germany was as yet comparatively unarmed, and certainly unarmed at sea, prevented her from being compared explicitly with the strongest European naval power, France, although Germany's possible preparations at sea were considered; further, the creation of a two-power standard navy was something entirely new, and was not the business of a committee set up to enquire into deficiencies by existing standards. In any case, new building depended on the terms to be reached at the forthcoming naval conference in 1935. Thus, the

* There is no explanation of the meaning of the word 'cover' either in this or related papers.

Admiralty's building plans were briefly discussed,⁽⁹⁸⁾ and the final report of the Committee contained a table of suggested expenditure on the naval replacement programme for the next five years; but all this was detail outside the scope of the Committee's specific recommendations and the principles underlying the details were therefore not examined. In other words, deficiencies were literally taken as applying to past programmes rather than to present needs.*

This failure to base their recommendations on new needs that were already apparent and likely to become more urgent as time went on and, in so doing, to suggest what should come first if there was not enough money for everything, should not be blamed entirely on the D.R.C. The Committee had neither been given, nor asked to recommend, a clear order of strategic priorities, and the Cabinet itself did not give much thought to this basic problem until the D.R.C. Report came up for discussion in the spring of 1934. It is true that immediate danger in the Far East had first drawn attention to the unsatisfactory state of the country's defences. It is also true that in the papers and the discussions preceding the appointment of the D.R.C. it is more than once said that, for the time being, defence expenditure should be governed by the following considerations of priority—The Far East, Europe and India. It seems, however, that this was not so much a suggested order of priority between these three items as a grouping together of the three separately from less important items. Moreover, events in Germany during 1933 could hardly do otherwise than make the policies of the Nazi Government an increasing source of anxiety. In fact the D.R.C. had recommended that Germany was to be taken as the ultimate potential enemy against whom Britain's long range defence must be directed. And, further, their view was that although hostilities with Japan might begin in some unexpected emergency, similar to that of the autumn of 1931, a situation more likely to tempt Japan into war against Britain would be a war between the latter and Germany. This view was strengthened by arguments that Japan's immediate complications were more likely to occur with Russia than with Britain, and that a one-to-one war between Japan and Britain would, in any case lead to a stalemate.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Certain consequences would seem to follow from this. If it was accepted that with a one-power navy Britain could not simultaneously fight both Japan and the strongest European naval power, and if Japan was most likely to attack a Britain already involved in a European war, then the logical conclusion would be to concentrate British strength at the first stage in the European theatre, and so, in deterring a European

* See above, pp. 96-99.

aggressor, at the same time rob Japan of her most promising chance to profit as a third party. And this was the more conclusive in that it was obviously dangerous to limit the estimate of a future German menace merely to the consideration of Britain's present relative position *vis-à-vis* Germany in naval strength. Germany was only beginning to rearm, and eventually she might well rearm on a grand scale at sea, as well as on land and in the air.

The D.R.C. did not, however, draw this conclusion from their own line of argument. While assuming that the balance of preparations must be weighted for a war against Germany as the ultimate potential enemy, the Committee took the view that although the roles of the Defence Services in such a war would not differ very much in kind from those that they filled in the war of 1914-18, they would differ in degree. The enemy forces with which the Navy would have to deal would, for many years, be much smaller both actually and relatively than in that war, and the Navy should be comfortably able to deal with Germany at sea with a limited proportion of its total strength, particularly if assured of the assistance of the French navy. This would then leave the Navy free to concentrate most of its resources against Japan. The Committee's recommendations concerning the Navy were, then, based mainly on the needs of a war in the Far East, and a naval war on two fronts was assumed to be possible without raising the problem of the two-power standard.

The policy concerning Japan that the D.R.C. recommended was two-fold. First, a serious attempt to renew former cordial relations with that country, even if that meant questioning the policy of preference for friendship with the United States which had caused the lapse of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1922. It was, of course, arguable that since the United States was left out of Britain's estimates for defence anyway, it was illogical to allow the latter's naval preparations to be dictated by American standards, and far better to measure desirable preparations only by those against whom war, in the traditional arrangement of British plans, might actually have to be fought. But the wider implications of this argument were political as well as strategic, and their validity depended on a totally unproved assumption that the maintenance of Britain's interest in the Far East and the furtherance of Japan's ambitions there were compatible.

The D.R.C., however, did not base their hopes of friendlier relations with Japan simply upon expressions of goodwill. They argued, secondly, that Japan was far more likely to listen to a Britain able to defend her interests, and, to that end, recommended the remedying of Britain's naval deficiencies along three broad lines. First, the modernisation of the capital ships of the fleet to keep pace

with similar improvements in Japanese capital ships, and a considerable increase of the Fleet Air Arm to bring us up to Treaty ratio with Japan. Equipment of other kinds was also to be increased and modernised. This would enable the main fleet, if ever it sailed to the Far East, to meet the Japanese fleet on at least equal terms in men and material. Second, in order to enable the fleet to move quickly to the Far East in an emergency and to be in a position to operate after moving, the Committee recommended the building up of fuel oil reserves to a total adequate for the needs of the first year of war, together with the necessary storage at home and abroad. Under this heading, also, it recommended expenditure on port defences so that the fleet's bases would be capable of being retained for its use. Third, the Committee recommended that the completion of the Singapore naval base should be brought forward from 1940 to 1938; thus the fleet, on its arrival in the Far East, would find the means requisite to maintain its fighting efficiency and mobility. In detail, this meant completing the graving dock, installing repair facilities and heavy gun defences, and building up stocks of ammunition and other equipment. The estimated cost of rectifying deficiencies on this basis during the next five years until 1939 was about £20 million. In addition the Committee included, after their report, details of the Admiralty's plans for shipbuilding in the next five years.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ This was, strictly speaking, replacement and not deficiency expenditure and was, of course, based upon assumptions which might be seriously modified by the forthcoming Naval Conference; but it is important to mention the broad details here, for this programme was considered together with the deficiency programme proper at the next and crucial stage of debate, and both were attacked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, on the same grounds. Briefly, on the assumption that the replacement of warships—particularly cruisers and destroyers—was likely to continue at the current scale necessary to conform to existing treaty limitations, and also that the replacement of the capital fleet would proceed at the rate of one ship a year commencing in 1937, the Committee estimated a total shipbuilding expenditure of £67 million during the five years to 1939. There was also an estimated expenditure of £5,600,000 in the same period for Fleet Air Arm expansion in addition to deficiency expenditure under the same head. All this, both deficiency and replacement expenditure was, it must be remembered, based upon a one-power standard, and took into account a naval war fought only against Japan.

The Chancellor's attack upon these figures and assumptions of the D.R.C. report raised issues of fundamental importance to Imperial strategy. Basing his own estimates, as we have already seen, upon the need for continuing a certain measure of economy,

he drove to its logical conclusion the view of the D.R.C. that Germany was Britain's real potential enemy. For if the need for economy precluded, as it clearly did in the Chancellor's view, the possibility of a war on two fronts, i.e. fighting simultaneously against both Germany and Japan, and if Germany was accounted the greater menace, then the logic of that view was that Britain could not seriously prepare for war against Japan either in repairing deficiencies or in new ship building. He pointed out, quite correctly, that it was on a possible conflict with Japan that the Committee had based their figures for the early replacement of the battle-fleet, for the equipment of the approaches to Singapore with fuel and equipment and the completion of Singapore itself, and complained that these figures did not 'get to grips with the impossibility of attempting to stand on level terms in the East while the European menace hangs over us'. His conclusion was that if Britain prepared for war against Germany she must give up any hope of similar preparations for a war against Japan. In detail that meant completing Singapore, 'if only out of good faith to the Dominions', but using it, when completed, only as a base for submarines and other light craft; we must 'postpone the idea of sending out . . . a fleet of capital ships capable of containing the Japanese fleet or meeting it in battle'.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ In this way, the naval deficiency programme over the next five years could be reduced from £21 million to £13 million and the replacement programme from £67 million to £5,500,000. The Chancellor admitted that if the First Lord of the Admiralty were to advise that capital ships would be needed in a war against Germany, he, the Chancellor, would accept that advice with the expenditure it involved.⁽¹⁰²⁾ But as we have seen, no such argument had so far been used in connection with Germany; the provision for capital ships was solely with a view to their possible employment against a rearming Japan.

However unpleasant, there was logic in what Mr. Chamberlain said, if it was assumed that the main danger to Britain now came increasingly from Germany and also if financial considerations were to be allowed to exclude a Two-Power Standard fleet. It might have been better if the D.R.C. had allowed itself to go beyond its 'deficiency' terms of reference, and had bluntly pointed out what had all along been the inherent limitations of the One-Power Standard, thus setting the unpleasant alternatives of limited capability or great expense fairly and squarely before the Cabinet. In any case, the Chancellor's proposals met with strong opposition.⁽¹⁰³⁾ And the situation was further complicated by the discovery that the limited modernisation so far proposed for capital ships would not render them comparable in efficiency with ships modernised by Japan and the United States; consequently under this head a further

sum of over £4 million must now be added to the D.R.C. figures.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ The logic of the Chancellor's argument naturally led some, the First Lord of the Admiralty among them, to question the correctness of considering Germany Britain's most important potential enemy. The real, present danger lay in the Far East. Further, the First Lord pointed out that Singapore could not be protected by light forces, as the Chancellor had suggested; the role of such forces was simply to maintain the situation against vital and irreparable danger until the main fleet arrived. To adopt the Chancellor's recommendations would be to alter the whole system of Imperial defence still based, as it always had been, on the assumption of ability to command the seas. Besides, it denied the view of the Committee that part of the way to return to amicable relations with Japan was to negotiate with her from strength and not from weakness. Other members of the Committee argued that to concentrate so exclusively on Home at the expense of Empire defence was hardly an argument likely to appeal to the Dominions, especially Australia and New Zealand, for whom Japan was the main danger.

But none of these arguments shifted the Chancellor from his main position, which was that the country simply could not afford such extensive preparations and that public opinion was in no mood to be asked to do so. And his were the views which in the end, and despite some twisting and turning to avoid the full implications of them, finally decided the issue. The suggestion of a defence loan to finance more ambitious plans was described by the Chancellor as 'the broad road which led to destruction'. Gradually opinion shifted round to his view that the first claim on additional expenditure must be to restore in full the economy cuts made in 1931, and that the electorate, much of it already anti-militarist in feeling, would yet more strongly resent any additional expenditure on armaments until that restoration had taken place.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Expressing himself freely in a private letter at this time Neville Chamberlain wrote:

'I have really won all along the line though in the case of the Navy I have had to postpone final decisions in view of the coming Naval Conference. But the First Lord evidently regards this as a victory for me . . . what does not satisfy me is that we do not shape our foreign policy accordingly. It may be true as the F.O. say (and I think it is) that the menace from Germany has perceptibly receded, but it does not seem to me to have disappeared so completely as to warrant our disregarding her altogether. And if we are to take the necessary measures of defence against her we certainly can't afford at the same time to rebuild our battle-fleet. Therefore we ought to be making eyes at Japan.'⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

The Chancellor's argument that the electorate might well vent its resentment at the next election was repeated by several members of the Ministerial Committee, and it is difficult to avoid the impression that, voiced or otherwise, it weighed most heavily with them. Indeed, if existing public opinion was to be taken as a guide, this looked like a fair estimate. The Fulham by-election had been followed, in January 1934, by a test of public opinion in Ilford, a London suburb. The editor of the *Ilford Recorder* printed a questionnaire on peace and the League which included the question whether Britain should go to the help of France or Germany, as the Locarno Treaty required, if the one was attacked by the other. The ballot registered the answers: Yes, 5,898; No, 18,498. A few months later, in November 1934, a by-election at Putney revealed the same spirit. The Conservative candidate stated that he was in favour of the League, but also said, concerning intervention against aggressors, that the 'circumstances would have to be altogether exceptional to warrant any boy from Putney shedding his blood in some foreign field'. The Labour candidate fought as a Peace candidate, and the Government was accused of preferring to put money into the pockets of private arms manufacturers rather than spend on the social services. If the Ministerial Committee were timid, they certainly did not misjudge those who would have to pay. Nor, again, in deciding what to ask them to pay for, did they misjudge them in arguing that expenditure on a home defence air force would win far more support than that on an expeditionary force or on capital ships.

In the end the Ministerial Committee decided on a very limited naval programme and decided also to treat the repair of deficiencies and new building on the same basis. While admitting that they recognised the 'paramount importance of the Navy as the shield of the whole Empire and of its vital seaborne communications against naval attack', they regretted that they could not recommend to the Cabinet even a provisional long-range programme. Although this was partly because of doubtful issues bound up with the next Naval Conference, the Ministerial Committee stated quite plainly that the programme suggested must be treated as tentative, not only because of the international situation but also because of the financial and political outlook.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ They then recommended that both naval deficiencies and the naval building programme should be dealt with only a year at a time and dealt with not by a special programme, but by the normal method of negotiation between Treasury and Admiralty, with reference to the Cabinet in case of difficulty. All later programmes should be postponed for the present.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ The Cabinet accepted this plan without question, simply stating a time when they wished to be informed of the results of negotiations

for the next financial year between the Chancellor and the First Lord.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

It is not unfair to end this story of the first deficiency programme on a note of bleak frustration. A balanced programme of £75 million had been amended to one only two-thirds that size, and so altered in distribution that the air gained at the expense of the other two arms for reasons far from convincing on military grounds alone however much they appealed to the general public. In his announcement to the House of Commons on 30th July, the Government spokesman, Mr. Baldwin, mentioned only the measures designed to strengthen the Royal Air Force.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ And even this modest announcement was greeted by the Leader of the Opposition with the words 'We deny the need for increased air armaments'.⁽¹¹¹⁾

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| (2) For a further justification of this view, see C.P. 104(34) | 94 |
| (3) D.R.C. 14, para. 31 | 94 |
| (4) Cab. Regd. File I.D./K/35. Letter from Sir Warren Fisher to Sir Maurice Hankey, 7th February 1935. This was a point of view frequently stressed by Sir Warren Fisher. There is a detailed exposition of his views in N.C.M. (35)3 | 94 |
| (5) F.O. F.675/675/23 | 95 |
| (6) D.R.C. 14, para. 8 | 95 |
| (7) Ibid., para. 7 | 95 |
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| (9) C.P. 106(34) and Cab. Cons. 16(34)4 | 95 |
| (10) Cab. Cons. 10(34)2, C.P. 77(34) and C.P. 80(34). For later discussions of a non-aggression pact, see Cab. Cons. 32(34)4 and C.P. 223(34) | 95 |
| (11) D.R.C. 14, para. 12 | 96 |
| (12) C.P. 77(34) Memoranda 1 and 2 | 96 |
| (13) For an estimate, at about this time, of Germany's armaments position, which was more a question of capacity and organisation for production than actual equipment, see C.I.D. 1134-B | 96 |
| (14) C.I.D. 261st Mtg. (2), and C.I.D. 1119-B; D.C.(M)(32) 41st Mtg., p. 11; D.R.C. 1st Mtg., p. 10 | 96 |
| (15) D.R.C. 4th Mtg., pp. 8-18; D.R.C. 5th Mtg., pp. 22-25 | 97 |
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| (17) D.R.C. 14, para. 130 and summary 5C. Fleet Air Arm, Army co-operation and overseas squadrons were all reckoned outside the 52 squadrons. | 97 |
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| (31) | Cab. Cons. 16(34) | 101 |
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| (33) | Ibid., 20(34)2; and C.P. 132(34) | 102 |
| (34) | H.C. 5s, Vol. 289: 2098 ff. | 102 |
| (35) | Ibid. | 102 |
| (36) | C.P. 132(34). The suggestion of an Air Pact is described briefly in Middlemas and Barnes, <i>op. cit.</i> , Chapter 28 | 102 |
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| (46) | See also <i>The Observer</i> , 4th March 1934 | 104 |
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| (52) | D.C.(M)(32) 120; D.C.(M)(32) 50th Mtg. | 105 |
| (53) | For details of these plans, see D.C.(M)(32) 123 and D.C.(M)(32), 51st, 52nd and 53rd Mtgs. | 106 |
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| (55) | For Lord Londonderry's own account of the events of this period see his book ' <i>Wings of Destiny</i> ', (London, 1943) | 106 |
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- (75) See, for example, D.C.(M)(32) 109 and C.P. 175(34) 110
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| (103) | Discussion of the naval sections of the programme is recorded in D.C.(M)(32) 50th, 51st and 55th Mtgs. | 124 |
| (104) | D.C.(M)(32) 125 | 125 |
| (105) | D.C.(M)(32) 50th, 51st and 55th Mtgs. | 125 |
| (106) | Neville Chamberlain, private letter to his sisters, 28th July 1934. | 125 |
| (107) | C.P. 205(34), paras. 61-62 | 126 |
| (108) | D.C.(M)(32) 55th Mtg. and C.P. 205(34), paras. 59-60 | 126 |
| (109) | Cab. Cons. 31(34) | 127 |
| (110) | H.C. 5s, Vol. 292: 2325 ff. | 127 |
| (111) | Ibid., 2349 | 127 |

PART II

CHAPTER V

GERMAN REARMAMENT, THE STRESA FRONT AND THE ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT, NOVEMBER 1934 TO JULY 1935

1. *German Rearmament, 1934-35*

THE BREAKDOWN of diplomatic efforts to build a bridge between Germany and France in time for the reassembling of the General Commission of the Disarmament Conference at the end of May 1934 was followed by a new and important move by the French. Under the guidance of M. Barthou, who became Foreign Minister in M. Doumergue's government in February 1934, it became increasingly clear not only that France was anxious for security rather than disarmament, but also that she saw the best immediate road to security against a resurgent Germany in a policy of alliances such as she had adopted under M. Poincaré's leadership some ten years before. In the words of the British Ambassador in Paris,

'France, being unable to obtain from Great Britain those precise guarantees of security which in the opinion of the present French Government would alone justify disarmament, has decided to fashion a system of security of her own, independent of Great Britain, which, if accepted by Germany, will enable disarmament again to be discussed. If not accepted by Germany, the system becomes automatically the best method of restraining Germany'.⁽¹⁾

The most important outcome of this reorientation was a joint Franco-Russian plan for an East European pact of mutual assistance between Germany, Poland, U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia and the Baltic States, which was announced after an interview between M. Barthou and M. Litvinov at Geneva on 18th May.

The plan for an East European Pact, as originally proposed, bore two serious defects from the British Government's point of view. In

the first place, it appeared too like an exclusive alliance directed against Germany. In the second place, if left to stand alone, and implying an admission of failure to agree with Germany on limitation of armaments, it would probably mean a return to competitive rearmament on a grand scale. The present proposal, in fact, looked like an association of France and Russia for mutual protection against Germany. The plan and these particular criticisms of it were the main topics at a series of conversations between M. Barthou and Sir John Simon when the former visited London on 9th and 10th July 1934.⁽²⁾ M. Barthou accepted the criticisms. He agreed that France should be prepared to offer to Germany a guarantee similar to that given to Russia, and that Russia should do likewise. Further, M. Barthou accepted the view of H.M. Government that the conclusion of a pact on these lines should be used as a means to resume negotiations for a general armaments convention. The pursuit of a 'régime of security' and 'equality of rights' must go together.⁽³⁾

With these concessions in hand H.M. Government announced their willingness to recommend the scheme of an Eastern Mutual Guarantee Pact to the German, Polish and Italian Governments. This was done immediately. Signor Mussolini, who had also opposed the original plan on the ground that it looked too much like an anti-German alliance, gave the amended version his blessing now that the condition of complete mutuality was established. But Germany and Poland were more difficult. Both objected to the pact, arguing that their own security was sufficiently guaranteed by existing bilateral non-aggression treaties, particularly that concluded between Germany and Poland the previous January, and that the suggested new treaty would increase their obligations without corresponding advantages. Further, for Germany, the signing of such a pact before fresh disarmament talks meant the renunciation of her claim that recognition of equality of rights must be the prior condition of any security arrangements. Negotiations were continued throughout the summer, but had made no advance before the tragic assassination of M. Barthou and King Alexander of Yugoslavia at Marseilles on 9th October 1934. The subsequent change in the direction of French foreign policy from the hands of M. Barthou to those of M. Laval involved a whole series of negotiations of importance to Britain which must be considered later. In the meantime, however, no mutual guarantee treaty had been signed and no agreement on what was to H.M. Government the more vital issue of disarmament. The consequence, as so often forecast, was that all this time Germany was steadily, indeed rapidly rearming, and the only possible answer, in default of some general agreement, was for others to do the same.

For some time past evidence had been accumulating about German rearmament, especially in the air, and the Air Ministry's

estimates of the growth of German air power had been rising steadily. In the autumn of 1933 their estimate had been that Germany would possess no military aircraft before the end of 1935 and only 200 or so for some years more.⁽⁴⁾ By March 1934, however, it was realised that Germany already had some 350 military aircraft and that her monthly production of all types had risen to 60.⁽⁵⁾ By the time the Ministerial Committee returned its amended version of the D.R.C. Report to the Cabinet in July 1934 something was guessed of the stages by which the German air force was to be expanded. But although it was now realised that the German aircraft industry was capable of very rapid expansion, the Air Staff did not anticipate anything larger than a force of about 500 first-line aircraft by October 1935, with a doubling of that number by 1939 and perhaps trebling by 1942.⁽⁶⁾ It was, therefore, a shock to learn from reliable information in October 1934, that the aim of the second stage of German expansion was about 1,300 first-line aircraft with considerable reserves by October 1936, instead of the anticipated 1,000 by April 1939. Moreover, aircraft output had risen since February from 60 to 140 a month, and the first stage of expansion was well up to schedule.⁽⁷⁾ Clearly the British air programme of July 1934,—and even that had not been worked out in detailed relation to the estimated German figures then—was no answer to what was known of German plans now. On Wednesday, 14th November, *The Times* published a statement that Herr von Ribbentrop, then German Commissioner for Armament, had seen Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden and, during the course of the interview, was reported to have explained to them 'the nature of such rearmament as is proceeding in Germany and to have stated emphatically that it had no aggressive purpose'. This statement was not altogether correct. An interview had taken place, but there had been no discussion of German rearmament. On the other hand, it was thought that Herr von Ribbentrop would like to make such a statement to the Prime Minister if provided with a suitable opportunity. The Government, however, were not certain that they wished to receive a statement officially, for, if they did, they would feel bound to communicate it to the French Government and might then be pressed to say what action they proposed to take.⁽⁸⁾

This ostrich-like behaviour, whatever its earlier justification in the desire on the part of H.M. Government to deal with the as yet un-sanctioned German rearmament as an integral part of a general disarmament settlement rather than condemn it on its own, was not possible indefinitely. Already it had led to discussion of our own needs and commitments in terms that bore little relationship to the ascertainable facts of the European situation; and those facts were now becoming too serious to be dealt with in the vague fashion that

a mixture of policies had so far prescribed. Not only were signs of German rearmament accumulating—some of which, as we have seen, suggested that in a year's time she would have as large an air force as that of the United Kingdom—but it was also certain that this subject would be raised in Parliament in the forthcoming debate on the Address in connection with Britain's general defence requirements.⁽⁹⁾ The time had come when the Cabinet must consider whether they ought to abandon their policy of ignoring German rearmament and, if not, what they proposed to do either if Germany demanded open acceptance of her action, or if she simply went ahead with her own rearmament without agreement. These matters, and the duty of accumulating all the available evidence, were now referred to a small Cabinet Committee which reported back to the Cabinet on 26th November 1934.⁽¹⁰⁾

The facts disclosed by this enquiry were impressive. By the Treaty of Versailles Germany was allowed an army whose role was simply that of the maintenance of internal order and frontier control. It was to consist of a maximum of seven infantry and three cavalry divisions, with total effectives not exceeding 100,000 men including officers, these latter in turn being limited to a maximum of 4,000. The General Staff and similar bodies were dissolved, and staffs in the War Ministries in the various German states limited to a total of 300. Conscription was abolished; limits were set to the numbers of weapons and to the manufacture, import and export of war material. The German navy was reduced to 6 battleships or armoured ships, no one of which was to exceed 10,000 tons displacement, 6 light cruisers not exceeding 6,000 tons each, 12 destroyers not exceeding 800 tons and 12 torpedo boats not exceeding 200 tons. There could also be a small reserve fleet. No submarines were permitted, and personnel—recruited only voluntarily—could not exceed 15,000. Finally, Germany was not allowed military or naval air forces of any kind.

The investigations of the German Rearmament Committee showed a very different state of affairs. The German army was now estimated to total 21 infantry and 3 cavalry divisions, comprising some 300,000 effectives of all ranks, with 1 or 2 mechanised divisions in process of formation. There was also a move to build up a war reserve by the military training of such bodies as the S.S., S.A., and R.A.D. (Reich Labour Service), in order to make up for the lack of trained reserves in case of mobilisation. It was estimated that by April 1935 there would be sufficient modern equipment for all 24 divisions except for some artillery, tanks and small arms. These figures agreed well with those put forward by the Belgian General Staff but not with French estimates of 100 German divisions ready for mobilisation by April 1935. This latter the Committee thought exaggerated.

The German navy already comprised 7 capital ships (2 of them of the new Deutschland 'pocket-battleship' class) 5 modern and 3 old cruisers, 12 modern and 4 old destroyers. There were building or projected 2 more Deutschland class ships, 1 cruiser and 4 destroyers.

Finally, there was evidence concerning German air rearmament, some of which we have already examined. It was estimated that, by 1st October 1935, Germany would have a force of 576 aircraft plus substantial reserves; a year later she would probably have a force of 1,368 first-line aircraft, again with substantial reserves, and a total by that date of 3,264 aircraft available for service purposes, including aircraft normally used for training.⁽¹¹⁾ Records which survived the war are insufficient to provide clear proof about the correctness, or otherwise, of these figures. But the limited evidence available suggests that they were substantially accurate and that the Germans were duly putting these plans into effect.⁽¹²⁾ In any case, the German aircraft industry was clearly expanding very rapidly. Immediate expansion of frame output to 500 per month was considered possible, although it was also considered that output of engines would for some time continue to be a limiting factor. The number of persons employed in the German aircraft industry had nearly doubled since December 1933, and now exceeded 15,000. As evidence of all this activity an Air Ministry memorandum quoted a report from the British consul at Leipzig which told of abnormal activity in Dessau. The Junkers Works, one of the largest aircraft factories in Europe, was located there, and was now working at high pressure in three shifts and continually having to expand. In one month alone, August 1934, the population of the town had increased by 700 owing to the demands of this factory and there was an acute housing shortage.⁽¹³⁾

In general the Committee thought that these present preparations were defensive, although by early 1935 it was likely that the army and the air force would have progressed sufficiently to provide a serious deterrent to French action if a crisis arose over the Saar plebiscite. The present scale of munitions production was insufficient for a war of aggression and, disregarding manpower, several more years of expansion in armaments manufacture were necessary before it would be possible to equip an army of the size said already to be in existence by the French.

The function of the Committee had been not merely to piece together the available evidence about German rearmament, but to help the Cabinet prepare its brief for the forthcoming debate on the Address, and also to make suggestions about Britain's attitude towards the legalisation—or otherwise—of what Germany had already accomplished in open secrecy. These two latter purposes, although at first they seemed likely to go together, were in fact soon

separated. For the time being the Government deliberately avoided the problem of official recognition or condemnation of German rearmament, hoping to advance to a solution by diplomatic methods. The steps they took in that direction will be considered later.* The Committee did, however, recommend as specific and comprehensive a public statement as possible on what could be done by way of expanding the Royal Air Force during the next two years. As a consequence, the Cabinet decided that, despite the seriousness of the Chancellor's warnings about finance, 22 squadrons for Home Defence and 3 for the Fleet Air Arm should be provided during the next two years in addition to the 4 squadrons already forming in the current year.⁽¹⁴⁾

Opening this particular part of the Parliamentary debate on 29th November,⁽¹⁵⁾ Mr. Churchill once again uttered a warning of the German threat and urged the maintenance, at all costs, in the next ten years of an air force substantially stronger than that of Germany. 'The idea that we can intervene usefully in sustaining the peace of Europe while we ourselves are the most vulnerable of all, are the beggars in fact, is one which cannot be held firmly by any one man who looks at this in the faithful discharge of his duty'. He then enlarged on the figures of German air strength he had given earlier, asking for Government confirmation or contradiction, but saying he feared that his own estimate might be an understatement. First, Germany already had an air force, ground services and reserves rapidly approaching parity with our own. Second, by November 1935, if Germany carried out her present programme without acceleration and we carried out ours without slowing down, she would be at least as strong as and possibly stronger than ourselves. Third, with similar provision as to the rate of execution of programmes, by the end of 1936 the German air force would be nearly 50 per cent stronger than, and in 1937, nearly double our own. Further, Germany already had between 200 and 300 civil aircraft capable of conversion against which we could set nothing comparable; so that, if these were taken into account, already by November 1935, Germany would be substantially stronger. Mr. Churchill ended by appealing to the Opposition not to continue to obstruct every attempt to secure a 'modest and reasonable defence to maintain the safety of the country. . . .' He then went on to appeal to the Government and the whole House:

'Do not, whatever may be the torrent of abuse which may obstruct the necessary action, think too poorly of the greatness of our fellow-countrymen. Let the House do its duty. Let the Government give the lead, and the nation will not fail in the hour of need.'⁽¹⁶⁾

* See below, p. 141.

The chief Government speech on this occasion, as in July, was made by Mr. Baldwin. He began and ended by saying that he still hoped for some limitation of armaments and for a general bringing together once more of the nations of Europe. He then gave his own figures of German preparations on the lines of the Cabinet Committee's investigations, and commented on those of Mr. Churchill. These latter he had had the opportunity of examining with his advisers before the debate. Rumours of the planned expansion of the German army to 300,000 were true, but it was not known just how far this had gone. The total strength of the German air force was probably between 600-1,000 service aircraft, but so far as was known no operational units had yet been formed although extensive preparations were being made, and the capacity of the German aircraft industry had undoubtedly expanded rapidly during the past six months. Our own present total first line strength of regular units of the R.A.F. at home and overseas was 880 aircraft, of which 560 were available for first line service in the United Kingdom.* With the additional 25 squadrons announced in the debate as due for completion during the next 2 years our first line strength in 1936 would be nearly 1,200 aircraft—again combining home and overseas squadrons. There was, therefore, no ground for undue alarm, still less panic, and no immediate menace confronting us or anyone else in Europe. There was, however, ground for anxiety, which was why the Government had decided to accelerate its July programme. Mr. Baldwin then went on to claim that Germany's 'real strength is not 50 per cent of our strength in Europe today'. With present rates of expansion maintained on both sides, then, a year hence, so far from Germany having an air force as strong as ours, our margin of superiority 'in Europe alone' would still be 50 per cent. He refused to forecast conditions in 1937 simply because he could not do so at that distance in time, but he suggested that Mr. Churchill's 1937 estimates were 'considerably exaggerated'.

'I cannot look' he said, 'with any certainty either into their figures or our own for more than the two years that I have given. All that I would say is this, that His Majesty's Government are determined in no conditions to accept any position of inferiority with regard to what air force may be raised in Germany in the future'.⁽¹⁷⁾

This speech was in some ways an unfortunate one. Up to a point it was a fairer guide than that of Mr. Churchill's; beyond that it was misleading. It is now known that, five weeks after this debate the Germans had formed—but mainly on paper—22 of the 48 squadrons

* The Auxiliary and Special Reserve Squadrons, with an establishment of 127 aircraft brought the total to just under 690.

of their first stage plan, with about 150 aircraft towards a full establishment of 264. Their total number of aircraft suitable for first line units was less than 600, and many of them were without engines or other essential items.⁽¹⁸⁾ Mr. Baldwin, therefore, was much nearer the truth than was Mr. Churchill in his comparison of present strengths. The trouble lay in his remarks about the future. He had spoken confidently of our prospective 50 per cent superiority at the end of 1935, but he had not compared estimated figures for the end of 1936. Moreover, he claimed that he could not forecast more than two years ahead and that 1937, therefore, lay beyond his powers. Nothing in the circumstances was more natural than for his audience to assume, as many undoubtedly did, that Mr. Baldwin's confidence about 1935 applied also to 1936, and that 1937 would be taken care of in due course. But the figures available to Mr. Baldwin, as to all other Ministers, showed quite clearly that, in the view of the Air Staff, Germany would have a margin of superiority of 100-200 first line aircraft by November 1936,* unless the German rate of expansion dropped in face of our own efforts—a possibility which had not been discussed either before or during the debate. And if Germany had so far overtaken us in 2 years, then the outlook for 1937 was grim. Not only did this speech later expose Mr. Baldwin to the charge that he had misled the House of Commons; it also encouraged some people abroad to believe that the plans of H.M. Government were simply a soothing draught for home consumption, and that the warning they were claimed to contain could be safely ignored. It is difficult to account for this lapse except on the assumption that the Government, for all their brave words about not accepting inferiority in the air, were still more concerned to attempt some measure of general disarmament than to prepare the nation's defences as an insurance against the possibility that such an attempt might conclusively fail. Indeed, the two objects were not necessarily incompatible. There was no reason, on this occasion, why a detailed enquiry into German plans should not have been accompanied by comparing them, in equal detail, with our own. Surely that was what parity involved. But the approach, at the political level, was altogether more haphazard.†

This inconclusive attitude of the Government towards the accumulating details of German rearmament can be the better understood if we remember that, in making a public statement on the subject, the Government was not merely coping with the exigencies of debate in the House of Commons, but also reopening those negotiations upon

* See above, p. 137.

† I have not found any evidence, whether in the G.R. series or in the normal C.P.'s that the decision to add 22+3 new air squadrons in 1935-36 was ever discussed in detail by the Cabinet or by Ministers independently.⁽¹⁹⁾

general disarmament and the return of Germany to the League which had now lapsed for some months. In fact, as the events of the next few months suggested, its anxiety under this second head was apparently still greater than that with which it regarded the state of defence preparations at home.

The debate itself undoubtedly forced the Government's hand at this particular point. By being compelled to make public its knowledge of what was going on in Germany it was presented with a diplomatic situation of some delicacy, which might have been made easier could it have been postponed until the forthcoming Saar plebiscite was taken and the reopening of disarmament talks discussed more fully with the French.⁽²⁰⁾ In the first place, since it was considered that the Commons statement must be worded as inoffensively as possible, it might be that the German Government, on that evidence alone, would take a simple admission of knowledge to imply approval. Indeed it was soon reported that the German Chancellor thought that the debate in the House of Commons gave Germany a title, good enough for all practical purposes, to those effectives and weapons which he had claimed for her in the previous spring. In fact it appeared that the view that the debate had so legalised her rearmament that she could now proceed to implement her plans without danger of intervention had rapidly become widespread in Germany, and was reflected in a slight rise in the shares of arms producing firms on the Berlin Stock Exchange.⁽²¹⁾ This prompted the Cabinet in London to inform the German Government in plain terms that they did not 'recognise the right of any signatory to a treaty to free itself from obligations imposed upon it without negotiation and agreement with the other signatories'.⁽²²⁾

Possible complications with the French were far more serious. Anxious above all things to get Germany back to the League of Nations and to the Disarmament Conference, the Cabinet were quite clear that the only practicable starting point for negotiations was an open acceptance of the fact, by France and Britain alike, that Germany had already armed well beyond what was allowed her by the disarmament clauses of Part V of the Treaty of Versailles and to negotiate with her from there. To delay that admission would merely encourage Germany yet further to increase her armaments in an atmosphere of formal secrecy; to say that she must not possess what she already had would make her refuse to negotiate at all, particularly since no one was likely to try to compel her by force to give up her plans.

'If the alternative to legalising German rearmament,' wrote the Foreign Secretary, 'was to prevent it, there would be everything to be said for not legalising it. But the alternative to legalising it is for German rearmament to continue just the same, with the

added complication that further increases are secret and that the sense of injustice and resentment continues to be stimulated . . . the fact is that Europe cannot remain half bound and half free in the matter of armaments. The party that is bound has already burst his chains and nobody is going to put the shackles on him again. It is only when that party is conceded by the others the right to equality in the sense that we are either all free or all bound by agreed limitation, that any prospect of agreed limitations can arise. It may be said that if we take the positive step of giving Germany her release under Part V . . . this will only hasten the day when she will bring up the next point, e.g. territorial boundaries or German colonies. All these things will come in time no doubt, and I doubt whether we should really be hastening the pace by recognising the inevitable and getting such terms as we can while we recognise it. We followed the French for twelve years in holding on to reparations and no good came out of it. It is the case of the Sibylline Books.'⁽²³⁾

But if it was important no longer to be led by the French, it was equally important to work together with them. The House of Commons debate immediately created some uneasiness in Paris lest Germany should regard the British move as an invitation to resume negotiations and herself seize the opportunity to put forward fresh proposals of an unacceptable character designed to drive a wedge between Great Britain and France.⁽²⁴⁾ Mr. Baldwin, then Lord Privy Seal, assured the French Ambassador on 30th November 1934 that there was no intention on the part of H.M. Government to invite Germany to take the next step, and that it was intended to treat the question of German rearmament solely as a European problem involving consultation with other countries and notably with France. But assurances were likely soon to lose their charm unless consultation actually took place.

On 12th December the Cabinet agreed that an early approach should be made to France in the form of an invitation to M. Flandin to visit England for the purpose of discussion.^{(25)*} The next weeks were spent in considering Britain's approach to those discussions and the programme to be put before the French. From these considerations certain guiding principles of the British Government's policy emerged. First, existing German rearmament must be recognised and we must be prepared to concede Germany equality of rights in the negotiation of any future armament convention. Such a convention would then replace certain clauses of Part V of the Treaty of Versailles, but there would be no tampering with the clause which dealt with the demilitarised zone. Second, in return for

* M. Flandin had formed a Cabinet in succession to that of M. Doumergue, on 8th November 1934.

this Germany would be expected to return to Geneva, to accede to an Eastern Pact, and to join in the declaration with regard to Austrian integrity and independence of February, 1934. Third, Britain's approach to these negotiations should be based upon prior agreement between herself, France and Italy. Fourth, Britain must be prepared to buy French support for the plan by some contribution to her demand for a 'régime of security'. This was to some extent provided for by the proposed Eastern Pact and by Germany's adherence to the declaration concerning Austria—if she agreed to adhere. But should neither of these diplomatic methods work out as intended, then Britain should consider the desirability of reassuring France by some declaration concerning Belgian independence, a reaffirmation of her interest in the continued demilitarisation of the Rhineland, some more explicit acknowledgement of her obligations to France and Belgium under Locarno, or an attempt, on British initiative, to secure a guarantee of Austrian independence by all her neighbours. Britain's own rearmament programme was argued to be evidence of good faith in offering help to achieve security.

It should be noticed, what the Cabinet openly admitted to themselves, that the contribution which Britain was offering to make to security was primarily of measures which would ensure British security. There was no intention of giving the French confidence by engaging in Staff talks, except possibly as a means of ensuring the effectiveness of action under the Treaty of Locarno should it be found impossible to get any agreement with Germany. On the other hand, the Cabinet were aware that if, in offering these terms, they reached deadlock with the French, then Hitler would emerge as the sole beneficiary. That, however, was a risk which must be taken if an end was to be made to 'the present fatal drift towards chaos and war'.⁽²⁶⁾ In taking this risk the Cabinet were trying not merely to placate that domestic public opinion which rated so highly the return of Germany to Geneva, but also to prevent the initiative from passing finally into the hands of Hitler. It was a reasonable plan. For combined action between Italy, France and the United Kingdom still seemed possible.

The Cabinet wanted the negotiations with France to be pressed on as quickly as possible, for they were anxious not to waste the domestic and international effects of the Commons debate either by lapse of time or by allowing time for some independent action by Germany. Aware of the need to compromise in order to deal with the French at all, they were also determined to proceed with their plans even if the timetable was spread out more than they would have liked. On 22nd December, therefore, Sir John Simon met MM. Flandin and Laval in Paris, a visit intended not to replace the proposed Anglo-French talks in London but to hurry them on. Sir

John Simon urged that Anglo-French co-operation, which had recently proved so fruitful in providing an international force for the Saar and in the settlement of the Yugoslav-Hungarian dispute, should be further developed in dealing with German rearmament, and that before a successful plebiscite in the Saar encouraged Germany to raise her terms.* The French were more forthcoming than had been expected. M. Laval began by pointing out that his immediate objects were an agreement with Italy on the subject of a multilateral assurance for safeguarding Austria's frontiers, and also the promotion of an Eastern Pact. Under pressure from Sir John Simon, however, he moderated his attitude. Expressing sympathy with the British view that it was vital to negotiate with Germany before she was in an even better position to make the running, he admitted that the position taken up by the French Government on 17th April of that year could no longer be maintained.† Further, while he must go to Rome first, since the Austrian question was of most immediate importance both for reasons of French domestic policy and in view of French relations with the Little Entente, the French Government were prepared to postpone negotiations for an Eastern Pact until they could be taken up in combination with, and not before, discussion with Germany of an agreement about armaments. Finally, if British influence was used with Mussolini to promote a Franco-Italian agreement about Austria, the French Ministers would agree to visit London for the purpose of a conference. While expressing doubts about his ability to influence Signor Mussolini, Sir John Simon agreed to help; and it was further agreed that the forthcoming London talks would not be limited to German rearmament but would cover the whole European scene.⁽²⁷⁾

2. *The Stresa Front, January-April 1935*

There now followed three sets of talks each designed, in its own way, to bring France, Italy and Britain closer together. On 3rd January M. Laval left for Rome. On 7th January a series of agreements were signed by himself and by Signor Mussolini. These agreements comprised a treaty for the settlement of African questions, and a number of declarations dealing with other matters, principally central European problems and disarmament. The African agreement settled matters long in dispute between France and Italy. There were frontier rectifications between French Equatorial Africa and Italian Libya, and between French Somaliland and

* The Saar had been assigned to France after the First World War, but on condition that there should be a plebiscite after fifteen years in which the local population could decide whether to remain with France or revert to Germany.

† See above, p. 101.

Italian Eritrea, a protocol on Tunisian questions, and a declaration on economic collaboration. For central Europe, the two countries recommended the conclusion between Austria and other particularly interested states of a convention, within the framework of the League, for reciprocal non-intervention defined in wide terms. At one point there was a project to mention Britain specifically among the states to whom accession would be open, but this was dropped when H.M. Government impressed upon the Italians that this would constitute a new commitment to which they could not agree; they would, however, give their blessing to any scheme which emerged from these talks and considered themselves within the circle of primary consultants. On disarmament, the French and Italian Governments reaffirmed the 1932 declaration of equality of rights within a régime of security, but stated their view that no country was entitled to alter its armaments obligations by unilateral action. If Germany wished to free herself by her own action alone from the Treaty of Versailles, France and Italy would together consider the attitude to be adopted.⁽²⁸⁾

The reception given to the Rome Agreement was mixed. In Britain *The Times* was greatly in its favour: 'It is no exaggeration to say that yesterday's protocols improve the whole outlook in Europe, and that the concluded convention favourably changes the atmosphere of Mediterranean politics . . . Ever since the war a spirit of collaboration, on the firm establishment of which the League of Nations depends, has been frustrated in the Mediterranean by the persistent misunderstandings which have kept France and Italy apart . . . it is generally hoped that "the present agreements" will be but a prelude to a wider settlement, which will include even the thorny problem of German rearmament.'⁽²⁹⁾ The British Ambassador at Rome, however, sounded a warning note. The fact that both Mussolini and Laval appeared to be pleased might suggest a satisfactory agreement, but not all the omens were good. The Italians still showed suspicion and resentment—fostered by the hard French bargaining over the African settlement—and the French were still exhibiting a feeling of superiority over what they had long regarded as an inferior nation.⁽³⁰⁾

At the time few people seem to have foreseen the real danger implicit in the agreement, later described by Professor Toynbee. He pointed out that, while the Franco-Italian pact seemed significant as ending a feud which has been a danger to European politics since Versailles, and while it apparently prepared the ground for future collaboration in settling the vital problems of central Europe, it was on the surface, none the less, a bad bargain for Italy. Mussolini had come away with only a few 'crumbs from the French colonial table' with which to satisfy his land hunger, and the only reasonable

explanation of such an unequal arrangement must be an undisclosed *quid pro quo*. That, in fact, turned out to be a free hand for Italy's expansion at the expense of France's former protégée, Abyssinia.⁽³¹⁾

There is no written evidence that either the curious nature of the Franco-Italian agreement or its consequential hidden dangers were appreciated and discussed by the Cabinet in London.⁽³²⁾ Certainly they were neither discussed, nor even hinted at during the next set of talks between French and British representatives in London in early February.

For some weeks before these next talks took place Sir John Simon urged his colleagues to clear their minds upon some problems which would almost certainly have to be faced. He argued that there was little hope of carrying 'through the impending discussion to a useful and positive result unless we formulate in our minds and provisionally authorise our representative to put forward, if necessary, some contributions to security from our own side. These should be of a kind which will operate for our own security as well as for the security of others, but French Ministers will naturally be most interested in the second of these aspects'. The Foreign Secretary therefore suggested as possible British offers in the interest of security, support for the proposed multilateral non-interference pact in central Europe already agreed upon at Rome; support for an Eastern Pact; a redefinition of Britain's obligations under Locarno, particularly a restatement of her determination to defend Belgium against attack and a reaffirmation that the demilitarised Rhineland was still considered a vital British interest; and, finally, willingness to enter upon Staff talks with the French and the Belgians so that action under Locarno could be prompt and effective.⁽³³⁾

The Cabinet turned down all these suggestions with the exception of the first, and with qualified approval of the second. The proposal 'to put teeth into Locarno', by adding to the words of the original Treaty the statement that Britain would respond to a flagrant act of aggression against Belgium 'immediately' and 'by all means in her power',⁽³⁴⁾ was rejected on the ground that the Government must carry public opinion along with them, and that what the country disliked was 'quixotic interference'. There was general unwillingness to speak of defending Belgian integrity except in terms of British security, and a feeling that the colourless statement about Belgian independence which the Foreign Secretary had made in Parliament the previous summer was sufficient.* The earlier statement had been made in that form through sheer unwillingness to pay the price of anything more definite. And the same was true

* See above, pp. 113-14.

now. As for the Rhineland, all discussion of the subject with the French was to be avoided if possible. If not, then the British negotiators should simply say that Britain had no intention of going back on the terms of Locarno.⁽³⁵⁾

The Cabinet's attitude towards the forthcoming French talks was an unfortunate mixture of good and bad. The leading assumption was that the French should be brought to see that German rearmament must now be admitted as a fact, and that the test of legality must be applied to the future rather than to the past. If this were done and, as a part of the process, Germany were brought back to Geneva, then such a development would be as much to the advantage of the French as to ourselves. The longer the Powers hesitated to make such an admission, the worse the situation would become, and the less chance would there be of getting a contribution towards an agreement from Germany. However intransigent the Germans had been so far, it is difficult to blame Mr. MacDonald and his colleagues for refusing to assume that they could never again usefully be brought to the conference table. And in so far as any democratic Government must follow public opinion, it is surely true that the British public in 1935 still wanted disarmament and peace through a League of Nations which should include Germany. The trouble lay elsewhere. If the public was to be encouraged by the Government in its laudable desire to pursue the path of collective security, then it was the duty of the Government to make clear to the public that collective security was too precious a possession to be bought without sacrifice. If it was right for the Government to refuse to commit the country to unspecified adventures, then it was wrong to allow the country to suppose that every commitment in a system of collective security could be limited by what our own definition of our own interests prescribed. Plain speaking about our own strategic interests and our determination to defend those of our friends could hardly do more harm to relations with Germany than refusal to speak would do to relations with France and Italy. It is difficult, at this juncture, not to feel that, under cover of the desire to get Germany back into the League, the British Government were deliberately refusing to face the unpleasant consequences of failing in that attempt.⁽³⁶⁾

The French, on the other hand, were quite clear what they wanted and said so. At the outset of the conversations which began in London on the morning of 1st February 1935, MM. Flandin and Laval argued that if Part V of the Treaty of Versailles were abrogated and the existing circumstances of German rearmament legalised without any addition to security, then the French and British Governments would not have done good work for peace. They claimed that Russia, the members of the Little Entente, and

the Balkan Powers would have confidence in what was done only in the degree to which they felt that the organisation of security had preceded an armaments convention. M. Laval explained that in the French view there were three kinds of security—collective regional pacts, the relationship of the size of the armed forces of different countries one to another, and guarantees of execution. Under the first head, what had been done at Locarno should be extended to the rest of Europe. Under the second, the French claimed a permanent margin of superiority for France in the relationship between the armed forces of France and Germany. Under the third, the French wanted an assurance that the guarantees of Locarno would be applied swiftly. That involved, in view of the increasing threat of sudden aggression from the air, the completion of Locarno by an air convention, by which the signatories of Locarno would guarantee immediate protection by their aerial forces to any of the contracting States which might be the victim of unprovoked aggression on the part of another of those States. M. Flandin pointed out that not only was an air convention a way of enabling the French Government to persuade French public opinion to accept the legalisation of German rearmament but, in face of the fact of German rearmament, it would also be proof of that Anglo-French solidarity without which any further political advance would be impossible. In other words, it soon became obvious that no announcement concerning German rearmament within a general scheme of disarmament—the British objective—would emerge from the talks unless Britain made some move to accede to the French plan of an air convention as part of a new move towards organised security.

A special meeting of the Cabinet was immediately summoned to consider the proposed air convention so that an official answer could be given to MM. Flandin and Laval while the talks were still in progress.⁽³⁷⁾ The Foreign Secretary had briefed the Cabinet with a paper in which he stressed three things. First, that the French negotiators felt that they must present to their public a new assurance in some detail from Britain, even though that assurance remained within the broad limits of existing Locarno commitments. Second, it was now obvious that unless we gave a favourable reply to the French suggestion we were not going to persuade the French to adopt our own formula about German rearmament and the abrogation of the relevant sections of Part V of the Treaty of Versailles. Third, the adoption of some such formula, as a public declaration resulting from the present Anglo-French conference, was an essential condition of an approach to Germany with any prospect of success. If we made such an approach and Germany rejected it, then her case would be damaged and our own strengthened. This

was, so Sir John Simon argued, the last time when such a procedure would be worth while; and it should be remembered that if we could not make terms with Germany, then we must face rearmament on our own part on an ever-increasing scale.⁽³⁸⁾

The Cabinet accepted this lead to some extent. They declared their interest in and sympathy with the French proposals, but demanded more time to study details and to reassure themselves about the procedure by which the air convention should be announced and should operate when concluded.⁽³⁹⁾ The French, although they would have preferred to conclude the general terms of the convention now, with consultation about details later, gave way to the British view on condition that agreement in principle should be made public forthwith. Both sides accepted the view that the proposed air convention should be limited to crises provided for by Locarno. Indeed, so far as Britain was concerned, the new agreement would provide a form of protection not included in the original Locarno treaties, since Britain would now be assisted in the event of an air attack upon her as well as bound to give assistance; originally Britain had promised help with no compensating claim to receive it. Finally, British Ministers successfully opposed the French request that, even if Germany refused to participate in the air convention, an agreement would still be made between other Governments. This was opposed as an anti-German move and one likely to provoke the wrong reaction to the agreement on Germany's part if she knew of it beforehand.

A communiqué summarising the results of the talks was published on 3rd February. It began by stating that the object of the recent meetings was the promotion of world peace by close European co-operation and the removal of all tendencies which might lead to a race in armaments. The British Government welcomed the Franco-Italian declaration of friendship and made it clear that they would be among those Powers which would, as provided in the Rome Agreement, consult together if the independence and integrity of Austria were menaced. The communiqué continued:

"The British and French Ministers hope that the encouraging progress thus achieved may now be continued by means of the direct and effective co-operation of Germany. They are agreed that neither Germany nor any other Power, whose armaments have been defined by the Peace Treaties is entitled by unilateral action to modify these obligations. But they are further agreed that nothing would contribute more to the restoration of confidence and the prospects of peace among nations than a general settlement freely negotiated between Germany and the other Powers. This general settlement would make provision for the organisation of security in Europe, particularly by means of the

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conclusion of pacts, freely negotiated between all the interested parties, and ensuring mutual assistance in eastern Europe and the system foreshadowed in the Rome *procès verbal* for central Europe. Simultaneously, and in conformity with the terms of the Declaration of 11th December 1932, regarding equality of rights in a system of security, this settlement would establish agreements regarding armaments generally which in the case of Germany, would replace the provisions of Part V of the Treaty of Versailles at present limiting the arms and armed forces of Germany. It would also be part of the general settlement that Germany should resume her place in the League of Nations with a view to active membership.'

The two Governments then invited Italy, Germany and Belgium to consider with them the prompt negotiation of an air pact as a deterrent to aggression and to ensure immunity from sudden attacks from the air, by providing for the assistance of the signatories' air forces to whichever Power might be the victim of unprovoked aerial aggression by one of the others.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Hopes had run high in this country before the meetings began, and the communiqué was well received. *The Times* thought it might well prove 'the most valuable contribution to European peace that has been made since Locarno' and welcomed the Air Pact as an amplification of Locarno.⁽⁴¹⁾ In the House, the Foreign Secretary assured a Liberal questioner that the pursuit of the objectives outlined in the communiqué would not lead to any slackening of efforts to secure disarmament.⁽⁴²⁾ Abroad there was a mixed reception. In France, where the communiqué was received as an earnest of Britain's slowly but surely growing recognition of the part she must play in collective security, satisfaction was almost too exuberant. In Belgium and Italy approval was expressed in more guarded but friendly terms. But in Russia and the Balkan countries there was some fear that the West might be aiming at its own security at the price of giving Germany a free hand in the East.

There was nothing, either in the terms of the talks themselves or in those of the final communiqué which supported this last conclusion. But neither was there any real advance in the practical terms of a general settlement with Germany or, what was an inevitable part of such a settlement, the terms by which France might find guarantees of security. In fact, and especially when seen together with the negative British approach to them, these talks mark the end of any reasonable hope of a general settlement. For that failure the British Government and people must take their share of blame. Peace with Germany could not be bought by pious hopes of collective security or by a desire simply to be fair to the Germans. Its price, or an important part of it, was that Britain should play an active part,

not merely that of a benevolent spectator, in the desires and responsibilities of European nations. Mr. Eden, on his return from a series of European visits a few weeks later, put this point to the Cabinet with admirable clarity. It was, he argued, less important to do something to strengthen peace than to make clear to any potential breaker of it that he could count on Britain's active opposition. He went on:

'If we refuse to be scared or weakened by Germany's growing demands, if we resist the temptation to accept everything Germany asks for as a basis for discussion between us, if for a moment we can cease to be an honest broker and become the honest facer of truths, then I am confident that there is no call to view the future with alarm. If, on the other hand, we appear to the outside world to be weak and vacillating, . . . then we shall encourage Germany's demands, and, no less serious, encourage the weaker Powers to take refuge with her in the belief that the collective peace system can never be effective because England will never play her part in its support.'⁽⁴³⁾

The next stage in these negotiations was the tripartite meeting at Stresa in April. Even before Stresa several things had occurred to complicate the international scene. On 4th March the British Government published the first of a series of annual White Papers on Defence.⁽⁴⁴⁾* In this was set out the case for repairing defence deficiencies and the ways in which an attempt was being made to do so. Herr Hitler was offended. He developed a cold, and a projected visit by Sir John Simon to Berlin had to be postponed. Next, on 15th March, the French Prime Minister, M. Flandin, carried a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies on his proposal to prolong the period of compulsory military service in France from one to two years: the French had for some time past been anxious about the approaching lean years in manpower from 1935 to 1939 brought about by the low birth-rate of the First World War.

The German reaction to the French move was prompt, and far more serious than the diplomatic annoyance expressed at Britain's White Paper. On 16th March Hitler promulgated a law establishing conscription for a German Army of twelve corps and thirty-six divisions.⁽⁴⁵⁾ This was accompanied by an appeal to the German people in which particular emphasis was laid upon Germany's unilateral disarmament and the failure of other countries to make any corresponding reduction in their armaments, a failure which was represented as an evasion of obligations under the Treaty of Versailles. The appeal, however, ended on a placatory note. It was claimed that in what had just been done the 'German Government desires . . . to ensure that the German Reich shall possess to the full

* See also below, Section 4.

that measure of organised physical force that is required not merely to maintain the Reich's integrity but also to win international respect and esteem for Germany as a co-guarantor of the general peace'.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Despite this flagrant unilateral repudiation of the terms of Versailles by Germany, Sir John Simon went ahead with the details for his and Mr. Eden's now rearranged visit to Berlin on 25th and 26th March. Moreover, he did so with the full approval both of the House of Commons and, at any rate ostensibly, of the French and Italian Governments.⁽⁴⁷⁾ It is clear, however, from the meetings Mr. Eden had with the French and Italian Foreign Ministers in Paris just before the Berlin visit, that there were fears beneath the surface. M. Laval and Signor Suvich pointed out that, in Germany, the forthcoming visit of Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden was being interpreted as evidence of friction between England on the one hand and France and Italy on the other. They therefore asked that the Berlin talks should be regarded as exploratory only and that Britain's line, even then, should be firm. Specifically, the French and Italian Ministers stressed the importance, from their point of view, of getting Germany into a Central European Pact and an Eastern Pact. Moreover, M. Laval stressed, with Italian agreement,

'... that it was important that the three Governments should consider in advance the situation that would arise in the event of a violation of the demilitarised zone by Germany. . . . He hoped that the British Ministers would use very firm language to the German Government on this subject.'⁽⁴⁸⁾

Some aspects of the Berlin Talks of March 1935 will be considered shortly in connection with more specifically British developments.* But it is important to note that, despite the basically unsatisfactory nature of those talks from the point of view of a general settlement in Europe, the British Government did not then go on to Stresa in a more determined frame of mind.⁽⁴⁹⁾ The honest broker still remained the chosen role. This was to some extent understandable, both because of the urgent need to get Germany into some general negotiations if possible, and because it was desirable to avoid any public action or statement, at home or abroad, which Hitler might use to justify yet further infringements of Germany's obligations. But the honest broker attitude, whatever its justification in public, was by now far from a satisfactory attitude in the Government's private discussions in which it would have been possible, and indeed proper, to consider some of the more unpleasant consequences of

* See below, Section 3.

failure to get Germany back into the League on a generally agreed basis. Even if this is admitted, however, it must also be remembered that in their unwillingness to accept additional commitments likely to arise from failure of the negotiations with Germany the Government appears accurately to have reflected public opinion. This became clear during the Government's private discussions prior to Stresa, and in the public reception of the official Conference communiqué later.

The Cabinet spent some time, in early April, discussing what might happen at Stresa in the light of what had already happened at Berlin, London and Rome. The views expressed, and they were views offered for the guidance of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary for their forthcoming talks abroad, revealed three broad lines of argument. First, H.M. Government should not agree to any French or Italian suggestion—if one were made—of putting an end to further negotiations with Germany. Although, admittedly, there were not many signs that Germany would co-operate, yet no one could be fully convinced of this until after further exploration. Having established contact with Germany by the March talks in Berlin, it was important to keep it to find out more of what Germany had in mind. To adopt the contrary point of view would only rally German public opinion behind Hitler more strongly than ever. And, with Germany in a potentially dangerous mood and not inclined to yield to threats, this might lead to trouble in which Britain herself might be involved. Second, H.M. Government wished to keep their contacts with Germany without denying obligations already accepted and, in particular, while reaffirming a common policy with Italy and France. The real importance of Stresa would be to confirm British solidarity with those two Powers, so that Germany would not be misled into thinking that she could deal with other nations piecemeal. As part of this process, Britain should reaffirm emphatically her commitments under the Covenant and Locarno. It was admitted, however, that it would be a difficult task to reassure France and Italy without isolating Germany. Third, the discussions revealed a general unwillingness among Ministers to see Britain accept further commitments arising either out of any East European complications or from a more specific analysis of possible commitments under Locarno. Although the sanctity of Locarno was to be stressed, yet the purpose of this was not in order to be the better prepared for possible action consequent upon an infringement of the treaty but to give the Germans notice that, though they had disregarded treaty obligations about armaments, they had better be warned against disregarding the Locarno Treaty itself. The likely outcome of this ambivalent approach was not even discussed.⁽⁵⁰⁾

The day before the Stresa Conference met the French announced

that agreement in principle had been reached between France and Russia to conclude a convention of mutual assistance; Czechoslovakia and the Baltic States had been asked to join in. With the Eastern Pact on the Stresa agenda it had hardly been expected that discussions under that head would be forestalled by a virtual *fait accompli*, and the news was unpalatable to Britain and Italy, not to mention Germany.

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that Stresa achieved so little. It represented not the high-water mark of success but the essential failure of a period. The conference opened on 11th April.⁽⁵¹⁾ A great deal of time was taken up with discussing the terms of a French appeal to the League against German rearmament and calling for collective retaliatory measures. In the end this was watered down by British opposition, and was eventually presented to an extraordinary session of the Council of the League a few days later.⁽⁵²⁾ Negotiations for an Eastern Pact and for a Central European Pact were carried no further than the statements of principle of the conferences of the earlier part of the year. On armaments, all three Governments were in favour of some system of limitation but seemed unhelpful that much would be done with German rearmament proceeding so rapidly.

Certainly disarmament in the old sense was no longer considered possible. On the subject of an Air Pact, again, no advance was made. The French were anxious to pave the way for a general pact of assistance by means of air power through a series of bilateral pacts among the Stresa Powers; H.M. Government were determined to proceed, if at all, only on a multilateral basis which would include the other Locarno signatories. On the subject of the demilitarised zone an apparently stronger line was agreed and adopted. The British and Italian representatives jointly issued the following statement:

‘The representatives of Italy and of the United Kingdom, the Powers which participate in the Treaty of Locarno only in the capacity of guarantors, formally reaffirm all their obligations under that Treaty, and declare their intention, should the need arise, faithfully to fulfil them.’⁽⁵³⁾

But no specific possibilities arising out of the infringement of Locarno or of the implementation of guarantees were discussed. Nevertheless the French representatives welcomed this virtually meaningless Anglo-Italian statement with ‘gratitude’, and declared that it ‘would have a profound effect in France’.

The results of the conference were discussed in the House of Commons briefly on 17th April,⁽⁵⁴⁾ and more at length on 2nd May.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The Prime Minister, both in the Cabinet and in the House,

emphasised that the main problem of renewing French and Italian confidence in Britain which, he admitted, 'had been somewhat impaired', had been successfully accomplished. Moreover, and this was obviously a matter of pride and self-congratulation to him, to get this result Britain had not been compelled to undertake any new commitments.

'We went to Stresa', Mr. MacDonald said, 'to consider . . . past statements of policy in the light of new and somewhat deteriorated conditions.'

Many people thought that these new conditions would involve new commitments by His Majesty's Government. We have assumed none. Without condoning her recent action, but on the contrary, making it plain that we regard it as a grave cause of unsettlement and a blow to any international organisation of peace and order, we have kept the door open for Germany to join as an active partner in the movements we have planned to create a system of collective security in Europe.

We have made it clear that our policy will continue to be based on the Covenant of the League of Nations. The three States represented at the Conference departed not as separate units broken by the undoubted difficulties they had to deal with, but as a combination of States pledged to keep together and try to find peaceful solutions for present dangers in co-operation with every State willing to associate itself with their work.'⁽⁵⁰⁾

The events of the summer and autumn of 1935 were to cast some doubts upon that hope.

3. *The Anglo-German Naval Agreement, June 1935*

A few weeks later the British Government, despite the 'combination of States', made a limited but separate agreement with Germany.

It is worth going back a little to discover the origins of this move. The Washington and London Naval Treaties were both due to expire at the end of 1936; but provision was made in each for a further conference during 1935 to try to reach new agreements while the existing treaties were still in force. During the second half of 1934 talks were held between British, American and Japanese representatives which, though friendly, disclosed serious differences of view. France and Italy, moreover, had also failed to agree on naval building programmes acceptable to both. It therefore became obvious that, although there was a desire for some sort of agreement if possible, the most that could be hoped for at this stage was a friendly adjournment leaving the way clear for further discussions through normal diplomatic channels. Then, on 30th December 1934,

and after warning the other signatories of her intention, Japan publicly announced her decision to terminate her adherence to the Washington Naval Treaty.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This she had a perfect right to do under the Treaty terms. But her action meant that no general naval agreements would be in existence after 31st December 1936, unless another could be negotiated meanwhile. The seriousness of this, particularly from Britain's point of view, was illustrated by the fact that Japan had more than doubled her naval expenditure between 1930 and 1935.⁽⁵⁸⁾

During the multilateral talks before Japan's denunciation of the Washington Treaty the participants had agreed that, pending a general naval conference, there was no objection to bilateral discussions about naval programmes with other countries, for example with Germany. And the British Admiralty very much wanted at any rate exploratory naval talks with Germany to take place. At a Cabinet meeting on 27th February 1935 the First Lord of the Admiralty expressed his wish that, before there was a general conference such as was planned for later that year, the attitude of France and Germany toward continued limitation of naval programmes should be investigated. In reply the Foreign Secretary announced that he had already had some talk with M. Corbin, the French Ambassador, on this subject, and would pursue the matter further in his forthcoming visits to Paris and Berlin.⁽⁵⁹⁾

On 20th March the Cabinet met again to discuss the agenda for the Foreign Secretary's postponed but now imminent trip abroad.⁽⁶⁰⁾ On this occasion, however, there was no mention of naval matters. Nor were they discussed either at Sir John Simon's talk with M. Laval on 28th February,⁽⁶¹⁾ or at Mr. Eden's joint meeting with M. Laval and Signor Suvich on 23rd March.⁽⁶²⁾ On these occasions only the broad problems of land and air armaments were dealt with; and it is true that neither the French nor the Italian representatives themselves raised the subject of navies.* On the other hand, two points should be borne in mind. First, that during their visit to London in the summer of 1934 M. Barthou and M. Pietri were told of the British view that it was worthwhile taking soundings in Berlin about Germany's requirements for a naval building programme, and on that occasion the French experts were informed, unofficially, of the strength in the various categories of ships which the British thought Germany might reasonably ask for if she were to become a party to any new general naval treaty. There were no conclusive discussions.

* For example, a note prepared in the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs and handed to Mr. Eden on 23rd March contains the following concluding remark on the matter of armaments: 'Il importerait également de savoir—et ceci intéresse les armements terrestres comme les armements aériens—si, et dans quelle limite, l'Allemagne accepte le principe d'un control efficace automatique et permanent.'⁽⁶³⁾

But the French representatives did not make any strong objection to the suggestions put forward by the British at that time. Second, the Foreign Office and the Admiralty in London argued 'that the question of the limitation of naval armaments should continue, as in the past, to be discussed separately from that of land and air armaments'. And one reason for this was that a time limit was set to naval discussions by the provision in the Washington and London treaties calling for a naval conference in 1935. This process might well be unduly delayed if any agreement about Germany's navy was held up until the whole question of German rearmament had been finally settled.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden met Herr Hitler in Berlin on 25th March.⁽⁶⁵⁾ On the second day of these talks naval armaments were dealt with at some length. There was nothing surprising in this. The First Lord, as we have seen, had urged the Foreign Secretary to make enquiries. Moreover, the German Government had already made its own overtures. In November 1934 Admiral Raeder had told the British Naval Attaché in Berlin that, although a general naval agreement might be difficult to reach, it seemed to him that the country with which it would be easiest for Germany to negotiate on naval matters 'would be England, since England must be well aware that Germany would never again build up a fleet against her.'⁽⁶⁶⁾ Then, on 16th March 1935, in a private talk with the British Ambassador, in which Hitler announced his intention to reintroduce universal compulsory military service, he also announced Germany's claim to a navy 35 per cent of the size of the Royal Navy.⁽⁶⁷⁾

In raising the subject of naval armaments in Berlin on 25th March, Sir John Simon said that he did so expressly with a general naval conference in mind in the near future.

'With this in view, it would be useful if informal exchanges of views could now take place on the naval question between representatives of His Majesty's Government and the German Government. . . . His Majesty's Government would like in these discussions to learn from the German representatives the view of the German Government as to the requirements which Germany would wish to be discussed at a naval conference.

It would be understood, of course, that this proposal was made without prejudice to the validity of existing treaty provisions, and was made with all reserve on this point and without prejudice to any agreement regarding armaments generally which might be reached as part of the general settlement foreshadowed in the London communiqué.'⁽⁶⁸⁾

At a later point in the discussion Sir John Simon repeated that the invitation to 'preliminary' talks in London 'in preparation for

the naval conference . . . was not an abandonment of existing treaty provisions, but was given and accepted with all reserve on this point, because it was for the future negotiation to reach a new agreement.'

In reply Hitler showed little interest in a general naval conference, 'the date of which had not been fixed and the results of which were not certain.' Vital German needs must be protected in any case. On the other hand, he did not want to get involved in 'an unlimited naval armaments race as had been the case before the war. Germany did not think it politically desirable nor had she the necessary financial resources for such a race.' In making a clear claim for a navy 35 per cent the size of that of Britain, Hitler pointed out that this 'implied unequivocal recognition of British naval superiority.' But he also made it clear that he saw no reason whatever for Germany to accept inferiority in naval armaments to France or Italy, claiming that 'Germany's requirements for the protection of her trade were just as great as those of France or Italy for the protection of their trade'. And the record of the talks makes it plain that, in claiming the 35 per cent ratio, Hitler thought he was in fact asking for a navy equal in size to that of France at that time.

Sir John Simon, correcting Herr Hitler on the present facts, went on to utter a warning which does not seem to have been taken seriously either by Ministers or by Service advisers on the British side in the subsequent talks in London. The 35 per cent ratio, he argued:

' . . . would appear to the British Government—apart from any other question—to be so large as to make general agreement almost impossible. The result would therefore be, if that figure were insisted upon to promote the unlimited armaments race which the Chancellor said the German Government wished to avoid.

Such a figure would inevitably increase the demands of France, for the French figure was, roughly speaking, 50 per cent of the British figure. If it really was contemplated that the German Government intended to build up to so large a figure as that indicated, that meant new tonnage, and therefore the most efficient ships. It was quite obvious that this must result in putting up the size of the French and therefore also of the Italian navy. This would have serious results on the British figures.'

This part of the talks then ended with an agreement that Anglo-German discussions should take place in London 'to prepare for the Naval Conference'.⁽⁶⁹⁾

On his return to England the Foreign Secretary gave a full report of his Berlin visit to the Cabinet.⁽⁷⁰⁾ On 9th April he also made a

brief statement in the House of Commons, mentioning Germany's claim to a 35 per cent ratio.⁽⁷¹⁾

Although Sir John Simon, in his report to the Cabinet, had pointed out that Hitler's claim for 35 per cent might well force the French to increase their naval ship building and affect us in turn, it was nevertheless decided to hold talks with the Germans; and when Ministers were reminded that the naval part of the Berlin talks had not yet been reported to other naval Powers it was also decided to act independently in this matter and not necessarily in conjunction with those Powers.⁽⁷²⁾ Such a line of action had already been suggested by our Ambassador in Paris. On 3rd April he had written advising secrecy about the proposed naval talks with Germany because of the 'jumpy state of' public opinion in France, and arguing that a public announcement of an invitation by the British to the German Government to take part in naval talks 'though it would have aroused no suspicion three weeks ago, would be regarded today, if in advance of Stresa, as an encouragement to the German Government to persevere in their endeavour to divide the Western Powers'.⁽⁷³⁾ In the light of these events it is hardly surprising that naval disarmament in general, and the prospect of independent Anglo-German naval talks, were not mentioned at Stresa later in April, although land and air armaments were discussed. Nonetheless, at Stresa Sir John Simon did claim that his visit to Berlin had simply 'been to learn what Germany had to say'. And he went on to assure his French and Italian colleagues 'that there was no question of negotiations between Germany and the United Kingdom . . . he had taken the opportunity to say to Herr Hitler that it was no part of British policy to try to make a new friend at the expense of an old one'.⁽⁷⁴⁾

There were several reasons why H.M. Government was willing to pursue an independent line in one area of its relations with Germany, and that despite what were some obvious risks from the beginning. In the first place, it was determined not to 'undo the good of the Berlin visit',⁽⁷⁵⁾ and that was entirely in line with its by now established policy towards Germany. Secondly, Ministers were supported in this overall political approach by the equally determined professional arguments of the Royal Navy who were anxious to avoid a naval race similar to that of the years before the outbreak of the First World War. Indeed, in early April Sir John Simon had been faced with a request from the First Lord, Sir Bolton Eyres Monsell, that naval talks with the German Government should begin even before the Stresa meeting, a request he felt bound to refuse.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Finally, there was the, in some ways, purely fortuitous circumstance that that section of the Foreign Office which dealt with issues of naval disarmament, the American Department, was the

department directly involved on this occasion and was sympathetic towards the Admiralty point of view. On the other hand, the Central Department of the Foreign Office, which might have been expected to deal with what was primarily a diplomatic issue in Britain's relations with Germany, was opposed both to the independent line taken by the Cabinet and also to the Anglo-German agreement which was its result later on. There were those in the Central Department who took the view that, by acting in this way Britain was 'gratuitously providing the German Government with just the kind of opportunity they so much relished to drive a wedge between her and her closest friends'.⁽⁷⁷⁾

Naval talks between British and German representatives began in London on 4th June.* The Germans immediately made an offer which they claimed to be a generous one. If Britain gave a clear and formal recognition of Germany's 35 per cent claim, then Germany would regard that ratio as final and permanent, and would adhere to it regardless of any future colonial developments and independently of construction by other Powers. Thus, even if France increased the size of her navy, then provided Britain made no change neither would Germany do so. Further, Germany would not insist on the incorporation of the ratio in any international treaty, provided that the method adopted for general naval limitation in any such treaty gave Germany guarantees that the 35 per cent ratio in relation to Britain's naval strength would be maintained. Finally, the suggested ratio was intended to apply to separate categories of ships as well as to total tonnage and not to imply freedom to build excessively in any one class.⁽⁷⁹⁾ At this point Herr von Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador in London, made it clear that an acceptance in principle of the 35 per cent claim was, from the German point of view, a necessary preliminary to the more detailed discussion of classes of ships and dates of construction. In other words, the talks would stop unless the initial German demand was met.⁽⁸⁰⁾

The British representatives at the Anglo-German discussions commented favourably on these proposals. Broadly speaking their arguments were that Germany would build a fleet whether recognised by Britain or not, and that it was therefore best to agree formally to such a fleet at the lowest limit obtainable, particularly since the German representatives had explained that their Government would regard an agreement as 'final and permanent'. Moreover, on the assumption that the Washington Treaty ratio *vis-à-vis* Japan was maintained, and also assuming that Britain would not be involved in war without allies, the British representatives considered

* Almost simultaneously with the change of Government and Mr. Baldwin's decision to transfer Sir Samuel Hoare to the Foreign Office in place of Sir John Simon.⁽⁷⁸⁾

the 35 per cent ratio acceptable on general strategic grounds. Finally, and believing that such an offer on the part of Germany would not remain indefinitely open, failing British acceptances of it, they argued that 'we may have cause to regret it if we fail to take this chance of arresting German naval development at the level stated'.

The more general background to these matters was then outlined by the British representatives for Ministers in terms which remained typical of the approach of H.M. Government throughout the negotiations. These representatives had explained to their German counterparts that even if H.M. Government were to agree to the German proposal about ratios in so far as the Royal Navy was concerned there still remained the problem of the repercussions of any such acceptance on the other naval Powers; after all, 'there was a tacit understanding that, in advance of any international conference there should be no bilateral agreements during the present conversations'. It was, therefore, 'desirable and necessary that we should give the Governments of those Powers with whom we have had previous naval conversations an opportunity to express their view . . . before giving a final answer to the Germans'. Such an opportunity, however, does not seem at any stage to have been taken to imply—at least by the British representatives at the Anglo-German talks—that any contrary views would in fact either delay or prevent an Anglo-German agreement. They stated explicitly that in our own interest 'we should accept this offer of Herr Hitler's while it is still open'. And they went on to argue that:

'This German offer is of such outstanding importance that it would be a mistake to withhold acceptance merely on the ground that other Powers might feel some temporary annoyance at our action'.

On receiving this report of proceedings so far, including the views of the Naval Staff, the Ministerial Committee responsible for recommending policy in this matter—under the chairmanship of Mr. Baldwin—decided that the German offer ought to be accepted, but that before this was done formally the other Washington Treaty Powers should be informed. Difficulty was anticipated only with France. Some Ministers urged that care should be taken to avoid causing a breach with France, and others suggested that France might be more amenable if these naval proposals were linked with proposals for a wider arms agreement, particularly an air pact. But whatever doubts were expressed, it was in fact decided that while the other interested naval Powers, viz. France, Italy, the United States and Japan, should be told officially of the Anglo-German

talks so far before any formal conclusion to them was announced, yet

'it should be made clear that His Majesty's Government intended to continue the discussions on the basis proposed by Germany'.⁽⁸¹⁾

Notification immediately took place with the expected results.⁽⁸²⁾ America and Japan made no difficulty.⁽⁸³⁾ The Italian Government replied that, in its opinion, the best way to solve this problem was not on a bilateral basis but by general agreement.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The French Government objected strongly. It protested that the problem of German rearmament was one, and that piecemeal negotiations were likely to produce successive surrenders to German demands. More particularly, the suggested agreement between Britain and Germany would be contrary to the principle of co-operation between France, Britain and Italy embodied in the London February communiqué and repeated at Stresa. The French Government also stated that the basis of calculation of French naval strength would be greatly changed by the contemplated fourfold increase in the German navy over the Versailles figure, and that France might well have to increase her own fleet accordingly. And, finally, they argued that, without the sort of regional guarantee pacts envisaged in the Rome, London and Stresa talks, then the other European Powers, such as the U.S.S.R., would also increase their own programmes in face of Germany's new navy. Would Germany herself not then demand more?⁽⁸⁵⁾

On 22nd June the British reply to these objections was conveyed to the French Government. Conciliatory in tone, it emphasised that German naval armaments would in fact be limited by the proposed agreement, and also that it would be folly to delay agreement about naval armaments simply because agreed terms for land and air forces could not yet be found. But no concession of substance was made to the French point of view.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Meanwhile, the Anglo-German talks, interrupted while the communiqué mentioned above was delivered to the other Powers, were resumed on 14th June. The Germans began by proposing two amendments. First they asked that Germany should be allowed parity and not merely 35 per cent in submarines, and that she should be allowed to do this not by transferring tonnage from other classes but by increasing the overall size of the German fleet. Second, and in spite of their earlier talk about a 'final and permanent ratio', they claimed for Germany the right to ask Britain to make joint representations and, if necessary, to take joint action with Germany if some other European embarked on an excessive programme of construction.

Both these proposals were resisted strongly. It was pointed out that the second proposal was likely to offend other Powers, and

therefore to increase rather than to diminish the risk of competitive building. It was then agreed that:

‘... in the event of any Power embarking upon new construction of so abnormal and exceptional a character as violently to upset the existing equilibrium [the German Government] would have the right to draw the attention of His Majesty’s Government to the matter and to examine the new situation thus created. But... that, in default of agreement to the contrary between the two Governments, the 35 per cent ratio must stand.’⁽⁸⁷⁾

The submarine proposal was, from a purely British point of view, more important and more difficult. The German representatives claimed that Germany would want to exceed the 35 per cent ratio in submarines only in one of two cases. Either

‘If a general parity figure were to be agreed for a member of Powers in a future naval Treaty... or alternatively, if the United Kingdom were to reduce her submarine strength below the total of 52,700 tons contained in the London Naval Treaty.’

A compromise was eventually reached whereby Germany was given permission to achieve submarine parity if she wished, ‘such parity to be obtained through the transfer of tonnage from other categories’, i.e. without an increase above the overall 35 per cent.

On these terms notes were exchanged between the two Governments on 18th June.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Technical discussions then continued with the German representatives during which the latter proved amenable to British suggestions about qualitative limits in different classes which, at any rate so far as the British delegation was concerned, it was hoped would become part of a general naval settlement. The German representatives also gave details of proposed German building programmes based on the assumption of completing the 35 per cent ratio by the end of 1942. Efforts to persuade them to postpone and spread this programme resulted in a reduction to 28 submarines for 1935-36, though the final aggregate would remain the same, and in an agreement to relax the proposed capital ship construction if France could be persuaded to do likewise.^{(89)*}

* The German building programmes were as follows:

| | | |
|-------|---|--|
| 1934— | 2 capital ships (26,000 tons and 11-in. guns) | |
| | 9 destroyers | |
| 1935— | 2 cruisers | |
| | 1 aircraft carrier | |
| | 7 destroyers | |
| | 30 submarines | |
| 1936— | 1 capital ship | |
| | 1 cruiser | |
| | 4 destroyers | |
| | 10 submarines | |
| 1937— | 1 capital ship | |
| 1938— | 1 capital ship | |
| 1939 | 2 aircraft carriers | |
| —1942 | | |

} building in other classes according to tonnage remaining under the ratio

The agreement met with some criticism, both on political and on strategic grounds.* On political grounds the chief criticism was that a bilateral agreement between Britain and Germany was contrary to the spirit of the 'common front' talks held earlier in the year between Britain, France and Italy. It should, of course, be remembered that Britain had on more than one occasion urged upon the other members of the 'Stresa front' the need to recognise German armaments already in existence, even though they represented a unilateral denial of Part V of the Versailles Treaty, and to negotiate from there. Since there was no likelihood of action to deprive Germany of what she already had, this was a commonsense way of trying to prevent her getting too much more. But the naval agreement was not of this kind. Although Germany had already broken the Versailles Treaty in some naval matters, Britain's naval agreement with her was really for future programmes. It was not a recognition of the inevitable in the form of something already done. It was and was claimed to be a recognition of what would inevitably be done sooner or later.⁽⁹¹⁾

Not surprisingly, therefore, the agreement caused anti-British feeling in France. In response to this Mr. Eden went to Paris immediately afterwards for talks with M. Laval.⁽⁹²⁾ It is true that M. Laval admitted that he was not worried by the 35 per cent ratio in itself. And all along British experts had argued that this was the sensible line for France to take. But M. Laval did object to the method by which the agreement had been reached. He argued that, in France, the agreement was regarded as a British concession to Germany despite France, and in Germany as a break in the common front of Germany's erstwhile enemies. To this Mr. Eden replied that, from a strictly juridical point of view, the French 'position might be strong'. From a practical point of view, however, no British Government could have done otherwise.

Was M. Laval justified in objecting to British methods? The French and Italians had not seized their opportunities, it is true, to discuss naval armaments in detail at any of the series of major talks held earlier in the year. Moreover, the French Government certainly knew that Britain intended to discuss naval matters with Germany long before the June talks took place. On 21st February Sir John Simon discussed this point with the French Ambassador at some length. He stated that:

'The main purpose of our enquiry of the German Government would . . . be to ascertain Germany's probable naval requirements for a building programme during the period 1937-42.

* In Parliament the agreement was discussed in the debates on Foreign Office and Admiralty Votes, on 11th and 22nd July respectively.⁽⁹⁰⁾

This would commit neither ourselves nor any other foreign Government, but would enable us to ascertain what, in fact, were likely to be Germany's demands should she eventually participate in a general naval conference. It would be necessary, before commencing naval discussions with the German representatives, to make it clear to the German Government that this was being done without prejudice to the present validity of the naval clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and to any agreement regarding armaments generally, which, as part of the general settlement foreshadowed by the London proposals of the 3rd February 1935 may, in the case of Germany, replace the provisions of Part V of the treaty.

I added that we would of course, keep the French Government fully informed throughout the course of any discussions we might have with the German Government. . . . Once the conversations with the German representatives had been concluded, we thought the next step should be further discussions between the representatives of the British and French Governments.⁽⁹³⁾

On the other hand, as has been seen, the French and Italian Governments do not appear to have been notified of the details of naval matters discussed by Sir John Simon and Herr Hitler at the end of March. They appear to have been notified only in June, halfway through the Anglo-German talks in London. Moreover, even then it is not unfair to the British Government to claim that they were so impressed with the advantages of concluding a naval agreement with Germany on the basis of the 35 per cent ratio that they were determined to go ahead and complete such an agreement, whether other Powers objected or not. Indeed, in a Foreign Office memorandum of July 1935, prepared for private and confidential viewing in the Quai d'Orsay and designed to answer French criticisms, it was specifically stated that when the French were consulted at the end of the first week of June 'they were left in no doubt that this was a matter on which our own minds were already made up'.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Finally, it is misleading of the then Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare (later Lord Templewood) to write as though the French omitted to reply to the British communiqué of 7th June asking for comment on the proposed treaty.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The French reply, already referred to, was sent on 17th June.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Admittedly this was later than the British Government had hoped for. But this was an important issue from the French point of view, and their reply was in fact received a day before the main Anglo-German agreement was concluded—and was ignored.

That bad feeling was created between France and Britain is surely true. Surely, also, the French criticism of British methods was justified. And it is tempting to speculate on the extent to which these mistakes arose from a change of Foreign Secretary just as the

German and British representatives began their meetings in London. Writing many years later the Earl of Avon (formerly Mr. Eden) commented that Sir John Simon's 'colleagues used to complain that he was more apt to turn to them for a policy than to champion his own'.⁽⁹⁷⁾ On the whole that judgement stands. But in this particular case Simon had clearly warned his colleagues, and more than once, against the 35 per cent provision and against concluding a separate arrangement with Germany outside a general treaty to supersede those of Washington and London. Sir Samuel Hoare, his successor, complains that when he took over the Foreign Office he was 'overwhelmed with urgent questions such as the Anglo-German Naval Agreement'.⁽⁹⁸⁾ It may be that, unlike Simon, he had not made up his mind on the matter, and that events moved too fast for him ever to be able to do so.

In any case, how far is it possible to argue that political losses were justified by military gains? The anxieties of the British Government and the Admiralty about naval competition with Germany do not appear to have been acute for the immediate future. They considered that the 35 per cent ratio could be built, but that it would take until about 1942-43 to do so.⁽⁹⁹⁾ And they were basically correct in this estimate.* There was certainly no assumption that the treaty would impose a heavy handicap upon the expansion of the German Navy in the next five or six years.

We know now that the agreement was, in fact, welcomed by the German Navy. It was Raeder's view that naval construction in Germany could not for a decade be carried out within a substantially larger framework than the treaty provided for; it would, therefore, give Germany the chance to create a modern fleet developed according to a plan and adjusted to Germany's maritime needs.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ In other words, in so far as the treaty represented what Germany could and would do it made the naval situation no worse, and it was a reasonably accurate guide to what would be the situation for the next few years. Moreover, even if it did not alter facts, it at least appeared to remove naval shipbuilding from that prime place in armaments competition which it had occupied in the years before the First World War, and to that extent could be argued to be a contribution to better relations between the two countries. But it does not seem that the treaty 'undoubtedly slowed down naval construction'.⁽¹⁰²⁾ It is nearer the truth to say that 'what had in fact been done was to authorise Germany to build to her utmost capacity for five or six years to come'.⁽¹⁰³⁾

The Admiralty's eagerness to conclude an agreement on the

* In fact, in order to keep to the 35 per cent programme, Germany had to cancel several orders for cruisers, destroyers and submarines for foreign navies.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

35 per cent basis, and as quickly as possible, arose from a belief that the Germans would never again voluntarily accept so low a limit if this chance was lost, and that the agreement, once concluded, would be observed.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

'It is noteworthy', said one British report, 'that the German representatives have throughout been most insistent on emphasising the permanent and definitive character of the agreement under negotiation. They would scarcely have adopted such a determined attitude on this point throughout the whole of the negotiations had it not been the purpose of the German Government to play fair in this matter and to eliminate all danger of future naval rivalry between the two countries.'⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

Moreover, since the treaty would keep the German Navy at a fixed strength in relation to the Royal Navy it would, to that extent, make somewhat easier the problem of calculating the proper distribution of the latter as between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Writing after the war Lord Chatfield, himself First Sea Lord in 1935, claimed that this was a 'unique' treaty in that it represented a 'voluntary acceptance of armed inferiority on the seas' by Germany, that it was expected at that time to be observed by the signatories 'under all circumstances, unaffected by the construction of any third power', and that, in consequence, it offered the one hope of avoiding a naval arms race among the European Powers.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ And there can be little doubt that Lord Chatfield gives a fair account of senior Admiralty opinion as it was in 1935. Moreover, this anxiety to avoid a repetition of the pre-1914 competition between Britain and Germany deserves respect. Lord Chatfield, however, weakens his own argument by admitting, almost in the same breath, that Germany had already torn up the Versailles Treaty and had increased her land forces unilaterally. Since that was so, how sensible was it to rely on Germany to keep this particular agreement? * It is true that both now and later H.M. Government attempted to come to agreement on various matters with Germany, implying thereby a willingness to believe that Herr Hitler would keep his promises. To that extent Admiralty spokesmen were no more naïve than others. But it might have been wise, nonetheless, to consider the point made later by Mr. Eden, after the re-militarisation of the Rhineland, that safe and advantageous agreements with

* In practice the Germans were not altogether honest. It was agreed, by the Treaty, that each country should declare to the other the size and armament of new construction. Two German 8-in. cruisers were officially declared to the Admiralty as 6-in. cruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, of 31,500 tons were declared as 26,000 tons, and *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*, of 42,500 tons, were declared as 35,000 tons.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Also by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, Germany's largest armoured ships built as replacements (the 'pocket battleships') were limited to 10,000 tons and were declared as such by the Germans, though in fact they exceeded 11,000 tons.

Germany were those 'the durability of which might be assumed by reason of the fact that Herr Hitler would not be making any concrete concessions or submitting to any inconvenient restrictions'.* The essence of the Admiralty case was that Hitler had accepted restrictions on paper now and would continue to do so when paper figures were translated later into actual ships, perhaps even at a time when economic restrictions no longer imposed such limits on naval programmes as they did in 1935.

Even if full weight is given to the Admiralty's declared wish to avoid a naval arms race it is difficult to see what other value the agreement had. A year earlier the Admiralty stated that a One-Power Standard would be inadequate to satisfy the demands of simultaneous operations in the Far East and in European waters at the same time.† Moreover, even if the British government agreed to building programmes designed for a Two-Power Standard, that would still leave Germany and Japan—given the maintenance of existing ratios—free to match the increase. What had always been wanted, and asked for, was some margin above such totals to allow for the exigencies of war, particularly in widely separated theatres.

In the actual conditions of the spring of 1935 the Chiefs of Staff were clear that the existing margin of naval strength above that of Japan was sufficient only 'on the supposition that France will not be our enemy in Europe'. That, however, did not imply that a war simultaneously against Japan and a Germany weaker in naval strength than France could be contemplated with equanimity. In the first place the Chiefs of Staff assumed not only that France would not be our enemy but that she would in fact be our ally if we were engaged jointly with Germany and Japan. Even with France an ally, however, it was their view that no British Government 'could confide the *entire* protection of this country and its vital sea communications to a foreign navy in the absence of our Main Fleet', and that 'a British capital ship, cruiser and destroyer strength in home waters equal to that of Germany is, probably, the least that we could accept'. They then, went on to this conclusion.

'It would be important to have sufficient warning to enable us to bring forward our capital ships undergoing large repairs before we were called upon simultaneously to face Germany in European waters and send our Main Fleet to the Far East. Subject to this proviso, and except for the shortage of cruisers, we should in the next 3 or 4 years be able to provide naval security in an alliance with France against Germany while at the same time defending ourselves against Japanese aggression'.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

* See below, p. 239.

† See above, p. 117.

This was written early in 1935, some weeks before the Anglo-German agreement was concluded. In other words, writing of 'the next 3 or 4 years', and with the generally correct assumption by the Admiralty of Germany's shipbuilding capacity, the Chiefs of Staff referred to a period in which Germany would still be below the 35 per cent ratio. Even then, as we can see, reasonable safety was reckoned to be provided only on the assumption that France would be Britain's ally and that the ship repair programme for that period could be brought forward.

With the 35 per cent actually in mind, the Naval Staff a few weeks later added two further provisos:

'The increase of the German Fleet makes it essential to preserve our Washington Treaty ratio *vis-à-vis* Japan. A more rapid replacement of the British Battle Fleet than is visualised in the tentative British programme, may be necessary in order to ensure that in *new ships* the British Fleet does not fall behind the capital ship strength of Japan and Germany combined.'⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

And it will be remembered that, although hopes of a future naval conference were by no means ruled out at this stage, nonetheless Japan had already taken action to terminate the existing treaties by the end of 1936, and it was already known that her main reason for doing so was her objection to a continuation of the 5:5:3 ratio. In other words, even in 1935 the value of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty depended upon a situation in which France could be counted on as an ally, in which Japan would continue to accept the inferiority she agreed to in 1922, and in which Britain's own naval building programme would be considerably speeded up.

It would be unfair to any Government to criticise them for not making preparations complete in all circumstances for the defence of national interests. And so far as Britain was concerned, we have already seen the virtually insuperable problem of providing adequate naval defences by a small island Power with world-wide responsibilities. Further, it was true both that the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was the first armaments agreement which any Power had managed to conclude with Nazi Germany and that, if observed in the long-term, it might help to solve at least one critical problem in an armaments race. But the value of the treaty, from the strategic point of view, did depend essentially on Germany's good faith when the 35 per cent limit had been reached. And, even then, the acceptability of that limit itself depended, as we have just seen, upon the happy coincidence of several other factors of vital importance.

Criticising the treaty in the House of Commons, Mr. Churchill argued that the 35 per cent ratio would give the German Navy command in the Baltic; that France and Italy would be forced to

undertake new construction to keep pace, in modern ships, with Germany, and that this must cause Britain to review her own provisions for the Mediterranean; and that a German fleet built up to the 35 per cent would anchor most of the British Fleet to the North Sea, thus giving Japan far greater freedom of movement in the Far East than before.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ If it was an exaggeration to claim that most of the British Fleet would have to be retained in the North Sea to deal with an enemy one-third its size, nonetheless a fleet in Home waters equal to that of Germany was, as we have seen, the least the Chiefs of Staff contemplated even when Britain was allied with France. And if much more than 35 per cent of the British Fleet were, in fact, retained in home waters, then the position in the Far East could become critically dangerous. Again, Mr. Churchill was right to emphasise the relevance of the Mediterranean in these calculations. The Mediterranean, as we shall see later, was ranked at this stage below the North Sea and the Far East in strategic importance. But it was, nonetheless, a vital part of the system of Imperial communications. A threat to Britain's interests there, whether from general competitive building programmes, or from the emergence of any specific enemy, was bound to emphasise yet further the already apparent inadequacies of the One-Power Standard. Point was to be given to all this by the fast approaching Italo-Abyssinian war.

4. *The First Defence White Paper, March 1935:*
Air Expansion, Scheme C

Before going on, however, to consider the major international crisis of 1935, it is important to bring up to date the story of Britain's deficiency plans.

During the winter of 1934-35 and the spring of the latter year the British Government were compelled to review their existing deficiency programmes in the light of what was going on in Germany. This was especially true of plans to expand the Royal Air Force. We have seen how the accumulating evidence of German rearmament in the air had already made Britain's first deficiency programme seem inadequate in November 1934.* On 28th November, therefore, His Majesty's Government endeavoured to allay the anxiety which had been voiced by an announcement to Parliament that they were 'determined in no conditions to accept any position of inferiority with regard to what air force may be raised in Germany in the future'.⁽¹¹¹⁾ To implement this promise twenty two of the additional thirty five squadrons for Home Defence, announced in

* See above, Section 1.

the programme of the previous July,* were to be provided by April 1937, instead of April 1939.⁽¹¹²⁾

Then on 4th March 1935 the Government published its first annual Defence Statement.⁽¹¹³⁾ The idea of this paper appears to have originated during the November debate just referred to, and it was first conceived by a group of civil servants, several of whom had been prominent in the detailed preparatory work for the first deficiency programme. Their view was that there was an urgent need to educate the public about defence policy, and that a big debate in Parliament on an official statement was the best way to begin to do so.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ In January 1935 the Secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Maurice Hankey, recently returned from a tour of the Commonwealth, began to take a hand. He suggested that the proposed paper could best be issued in connection with the Defence Estimates. He further urged first, that in the statement Britain's peace policy should be emphasised and described as her 'first line of defence'; and, second, that the paper should be cautious in its reference to Belgium and Holland for, he added, 'I do not believe that public opinion, either in this country or in the Dominions, is ready for saying much on this subject'.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ And this, it should be remembered, was the view of one who, in private, was convinced of the need to build up an Expeditionary Force.

During January and February 1935 the draft paper passed several times through the hands of Ministers. Some changes were made, and in the process the Cabinet expressed the view that, in redrafting, those responsible should be careful to bring out the importance of Britain's defence forces from the point of view of peace, defence and deterrence against an outbreak of war; they were not to emphasise Britain's military obligations and commitments, nor her deficiencies from the point of view of offensive action. And, in all this, they were to make clear both that Britain's present defence forces were inadequate and that proper measures were being undertaken to put this right.⁽¹¹⁶⁾

The Defence Statement itself was very general in scope. It was intended to supplement, not to supplant the individual memoranda issued with the separate Service Estimates. It claimed, that 'the establishment of peace on a permanent footing is the principle aim of British foreign policy'. Unfortunately, however, public opinion had tended to assume 'that nothing is required for the maintenance of peace except the existing international political machinery, and that the older methods of defence—navies, armies and air forces—on which we have hitherto depended for our security in the last resort are no longer required'. This assumption was wrong. The

* See above, p. 138.

National Government could, therefore, no longer close its eyes to the fact that adequate defences were still required for security and to enable the British Empire to play its full part in maintaining the peace of the world.

The measures outlined by the Statement were really those of the deficiency programme of the previous summer. The Navy was still the first line of defence for the maintenance of essential sea communications. The Main Fleet was the basis of naval strategy, and, 'in the Main Fleet the capital ship remains the essential element upon which the whole structure of our naval strategy depends'. The Royal Air Force had as its principal role 'to provide (with the co-operation of ground defences) for the protection of the United Kingdom and particularly London against air attack'. And, in this connection, it was argued that

'the importance of the integrity of certain territories on the other side of the Channel and North Sea, which for centuries has been, and still remains, a vital interest to this country from a Naval point of view, looms larger than ever when air defence is also taken into consideration'.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

The needs and functions of the Army were not specifically mentioned.

The Statement had a mixed reception, at home and abroad. It had come boldly into the open when it said that His Majesty's Government, however optimistically they regarded what was happening in Germany, could not

'fail to recognise that not only the forces but the spirit in which the population, and especially the youth of the country, are being organised lend colour to, and substantiate, the general feeling of insecurity which has already been incontestably generated'.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

At this juncture, as we have seen, Hitler caught a diplomatic cold, and Sir John Simon's visit to Berlin had to be postponed.* But not for long. There were many reasons why Hitler wanted the visit to take place. And there was nothing in the basic honesty and moderation of the Statement in the least likely to alter his plans.

In the House of Commons the Government, as so often before in defence matters, were strongly criticised by the Opposition. A motion of censure on the Government was proposed, accusing them of acting 'at variance with the spirit in which the League of Nations was created to establish a collective world peace', and of making

* See above, p. 151.

international competition in armaments more likely and national safety less sure.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Mr. Attlee accused the Government of having failed to honour Britain's obligations, for example in the Far East, and so of distorting the principle of collective security. He further accused the Government of repeatedly defeating constructive proposals at the Disarmament Conference. The present defence proposals, he said, were claimed to be justified by the need to be able to honour international obligations in the future, for example, those undertaken in the Locarno Pact. 'Locarno', Mr. Attlee said, 'was to be the prelude to disarmament. What is the use of a Locarno Pact if you are to have a competition in armaments among the signatories? If it be said that we are asked to increase our armaments under the Locarno Pact I would like to know who has asked us. If there were to be such a request, it should come from all the signatories to that Pact'. And he ended on a note of deep significance for much that British Governments did and did not do between the two World Wars:

'Let there be no mistake about this White Paper. It marks a complete change of policy. We are back in a pre-war atmosphere. We are back in the system of alliance and rivalries and an armaments race. . . .

We in the Labour Party have laid down the lines which we believe we should follow. We believe that the policy as outlined here is disastrous, and it is rattling back to war. The Lord President, in a memorable speech, said that the air menace must be dealt with by the young men, but if it is for the young men to deal with, he had better get out and give them a chance. Will he go to the country and ask what the young men think? I believe that the young people will reject it all over the world. This policy of the old men, this moving backwards to an anarchic world brought us to the war of 1914-18, and will bring us to a far more terrible war unless the policy is entirely changed.'⁽¹²⁰⁾

And there can be no doubt that the Government agreed with Mr. Attlee enough to think that, while the public needed education in defence matters, it was capable of absorbing that education only slowly. Sir Herbert Samuel, the Liberal leader, followed much the same line as Mr. Attlee. The country as a whole wanted peace, and rearmament would take them further away from it. 'Disarmament is essential as a means to peace,' he said. And he ended with the charge that 'this White Paper and the whole policy on which it is based are an application of the old maxim "If you wish for peace, prepare for war,"' a maxim which, he claimed was not applicable in current circumstances.⁽¹²¹⁾

In defending the Statement, Mr. Baldwin did so on three grounds.

First, the Government's programme, with the exception of the expansion of the Royal Air Force, was essentially a deficiency programme designed to bring the Services up to a strength already agreed upon long before. Second, this was all being done so that Britain's armed forces could in future play their proper part in any system of collective security. And, third, the sense of urgency which had prompted the Government to go ahead with its plans was due not merely to failure in prolonged disarmament talks, it was also due to the fact that other Powers—Japan, Germany and Russia among them—were spending steadily increasing sums on armaments of all kinds. Britain was not taking a lead in this matter. And he ended on a note of warning as significant as Mr. Attlee's.

'There is one thing I would say and it is this. The greatest mistake that ever was made after the War—I do not know whether anybody did say it definitely, but I know that the hope was expressed during the War, but if anybody after the War had said that the War made the world safe for democracy, he made the greatest mistake of his life. The world has never been an unsafer place for democracy than it is today. . . .

I am quite convinced of this, that if our people as a whole feel that even the modest demands of this Paper, merely making your forces that you have got efficient—no increase in the Army, no increase in the Navy, an increase to at least the nearest striking force in Air—if they are not willing to do that, then indeed I believe that the risks of our democracy perishing are great.'

The debate continued to the end on broad lines of foreign policy rather than on strategy. And in the end the Opposition motion failed by 79 votes to 424.⁽¹²²⁾

Any temporary satisfaction the Government might have felt about the adequacy of its plans so far was rudely shattered when Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden went to Berlin at the end of March. During these talks Herr Hitler claimed that Germany had already attained parity with Great Britain in the air and that he intended she should soon achieve parity with France.⁽¹²³⁾ The Air Staff in London denied the validity of this claim as it applied to the present, and were entitled to do so.⁽¹²⁴⁾ But the Government, already touchy on this subject after the unfortunate debate of the previous November, decided to make further enquiries. In a debate in the House on 2nd May the Prime Minister, after repeating Sir John Simon's earlier statement, said:

'Whatever may be the exact interpretation of this phrase (parity) in terms of air strength, it undoubtedly indicated that the German Air Force has been expanded to a point considerably in

excess of the estimates which we were able to place before the House last year.'⁽¹²⁵⁾

Three weeks later Mr. Baldwin informed the House that, after Hitler's claim in March, 'subsequent examination in Berlin revealed the fact from those authorised to speak that he had in mind at that time 800 to 850 first-line aircraft. In the course of these conversations Herr Hitler made it clear that his goal was parity with France'. Mr. Baldwin added that His Majesty's Government assumed the French total to be 1,500 first-line aircraft, after deducting aircraft in the Far East, and that that was the figure at which Britain was now aiming.⁽¹²⁶⁾

This last remark of Mr. Baldwin's referred to the results of some re-thinking going on behind the scenes in Whitehall. On the last day of April 1935 the Ministerial Committee on Defence Requirements (the former Ministerial Committee on Disarmament under a new name) set up a small sub-committee on Air Parity with the following terms of reference:

'In consultation with representatives of the Air Ministry, to recommend what steps should be taken . . . to implement the policy stated in the House by the Lord President that in air strength and in air power this country should not be inferior to any country within striking distance of this country.'⁽¹²⁷⁾

The Sub-Committee worked quickly and presented two reports during May.⁽¹²⁸⁾ From these two reports, and from the discussions of them, it is clear that the plans for a much greater programme of air expansion which they advocated were inspired by two ideas. First, that in view of Hitler's claim to achieve air parity with France, H.M. Government's present plans to retain 'parity' would soon be proved seriously inadequate. It was true that the position to date was not too serious. There was already a deficiency of first-line aircraft, but this, it was argued, was still capable of being off-set by superior training and organisation in the Royal Air Force. On the other hand, if 'parity' was to be estimated on a numerical basis of first-line aircraft, then clearly, numerical disparity between the two air forces would increase if each side held to its already announced programmes.⁽¹²⁹⁾ The second assumption underlying these reports appears to have been that it was the urgent duty of the Government to take and announce measures of air defence which would pacify an alarmed public opinion at home, and also be designed to deter a rearming Germany from pressing her claims too far.* This later led

* Writing to his sisters on 26th May 1935, Neville Chamberlain says ' . . . I recognise and indeed insisted on the need for such a recasting of our air programme as would show its truly formidable character and thus act as a deterrent. . . . '

to some charges of 'shop-window dressing' in the interests of a superficial deterrent scheme at the expense of a well founded expansion programme including adequate training and reserves.

To assess the importance of the new scheme of air expansion, it is worth briefly reviewing what had happened already. This can most usefully be done by comparing the most important items of the 1923 52-Squadron scheme with the first expansion programme of July 1934—Scheme A:

| | 52-Squadron Scheme | Scheme A |
|----------|--------------------|----------|
| Bombers | 394 | 500 |
| Fighters | 204 | 336 |
| | — | — |
| | 598 | 836 |
| | — | — |

In November 1934 the totals of Scheme A were not changed, but the speed of expansion was increased. The investigations undertaken in the spring of 1935 into current German strength and future programmes suggested that Germany aimed at and was capable of achieving a total of rather over 1,500 first-line aircraft by April 1937. Thus Scheme A, whatever the immediate conditions, was clearly insufficient as a future programme.

The new programme of air expansion decided upon by the Cabinet—Scheme C—was announced to the House of Commons on 22nd May.⁽¹³⁰⁾ It provided for the raising of Britain's Metropolitan Air Force to a total of 123 squadrons, an addition of 39 squadrons to the existing scheme, and a total of 1,512 first-line aircraft. The figures for overseas establishment and the Fleet Air Arm were left as in Scheme A. The new programme was to be completed by 31st March 1937.

So far as the size and rate of expansion of this programme are concerned one or two points are of some significance. In the first place it ignored a German claim to some 2,000 aircraft by the end of 1935 on the ground that the Germans had mistaken their basis of comparison with the French. Secondly, the Air Staff originally favoured a completion date of 1939 for the British programme because, although Germany might achieve her 1,500 total by 1937—

'The Air Staff are of the opinion that it will be virtually impossible for her to produce within that period an air force so fully organised, equipped and trained that it will be adequately prepared for war. They consider that such a standard cannot be fully attained for at least a further two years after 1937, and that if our own preparations are designed to ensure parity with Germany by 1939, they will be likely to provide the measure of security which we require.'⁽¹³¹⁾

To that extent the new programme reflected the desire of Ministers for speed rather than that of the Air Staff for slow, steady consolidation. The latter still held to the view that very rapid expansion of the Royal Air Force at this stage would lower the high quality of the Service; they were, consequently, not anxious to press for a great increase in size. And they were strengthened in this view by the belief that Germany would not be ready for, and did not intend to go to war before 1942.⁽¹³²⁾ What had not yet been realised was the ambitious nature of German schemes and the momentum, in implementing those schemes, of which Nazi administration and industry were capable, despite planning and production problems not dissimilar in kind from those also faced in Britain in the pre-war years. And this was obviously one of the reasons why Ministers and Air Staff alike, at any rate at this stage, hoped for a stronger deterrent effect from the British expansion schemes than those schemes were capable of providing.

This brings us to the point, already mentioned, namely that Scheme C was unsound in that, in the interests of deterrence, it provided too much on the surface and too little in reserve. When the first expansion programme of 1934 was drawn up it was decided that the greater part of the necessary provision for war reserves material should be postponed until after 1938-39, i.e. the completion date for the 75 squadrons. This was done because it was thought that the deterrent effect at which the Government were aiming, required that most of the available money should be used to raise a maximum number of squadrons. And the Air Staff accepted this on the ground that, since they thought war unlikely before 1942, adequate reserves could be produced in the period 1939-42.⁽¹³³⁾ Scheme C was dealt with on the same principle and, to that extent, suffered from the same defect. In a memorandum written later in 1935 the Chief of the Air Staff pointed out that Scheme C, whatever its undoubted value in first line strength, was inadequate in reserves sufficient to provide for the casualties which must be expected in the early weeks of war, casualties which would not be replaced until industry had taken the time necessary to move over from a peace to a war footing. Only much greater peace-time reserves than were provided for by the scheme could hope to bridge that gap.⁽¹³⁴⁾

5. *The Second Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report,*
July 1935

This expansion of the Royal Air Force programme was important not merely because of its results in the one Service directly affected, but also because it led to a reconsideration of the deficiency programme as a whole.

Reconsideration in fact arose from a series of objections raised by the Chiefs of Staff to what were, in their view, unsatisfactory developments in the overall deficiency plans. Their objections were threefold. In the first place, the main items of the first deficiency programme of 1934 had been based on a five-year period ending in 1939, with additional items of less importance to be dealt with in a further four years. The completion of the new Air Force programme was now timed for 1937. Were the Army and the Navy, in consequence, to anticipate any alteration in the completion dates of their programmes? Secondly, the 1934 programme had been based on the assumption that the near menace of war came from Japan, the long-term menace from Germany. Without any express denial of that assumption there had now been two revised air programmes based on the assumption of a menace from Germany approaching increasingly near. In fact, in the view of the Chiefs of Staff, the most dangerous period *vis-à-vis* Japan would be from 1936 onwards, and that was earlier than the new date, 1937, by which the latest air programme, based on the risk of hostilities with Germany, was to be completed. Thirdly, the original report of the D.R.C. had been a balanced programme for all three Services, and that balance had been worked out both in relation to foreign policy and to the likely use of all three arms in any future war. The balance had been upset by every development since that first Report. 'If the threat of war is so serious and so immediate', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'it will not be enough to be prepared in the air alone; otherwise our scheme of national defence will be incomplete'. And, they added,

'Having regard to the importance of the maintenance of the integrity of the Low Countries, if any large increase in the Royal Air Force is made, ought not the state of preparedness of the Field Force to be accelerated?'⁽¹³⁵⁾

What was needed was an investigation into the problems of national defence as a whole in the light of the latest Air Force programme.

The direct outcome of all this was that early in July 1935 the Government asked the D.R.C. to re-examine, in the light of the current international situation and such military developments as the new air programme and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, and also with special reference to financial co-ordination, the current programmes for the Navy, Army and Air Force. The Committee was also asked to make recommendations for the future.⁽¹³⁶⁾

Towards the end of July the D.R.C. presented their second report which was intended to be an interim one. In this, after a rapid survey of defence requirements in the light of the current and prospective international situation, the Committee asked for

confirmation of their own views and for further guidance before proceeding to work out new programmes in detail.

The Committee's summary of the international situation afforded no ground for comfort. The attitude of Japan was no more reassuring than it had been in 1934, indeed there was some evidence of a rapprochement between her and Germany, and the time was rapidly approaching when Japan would be relatively at her strongest in the Far East. In Europe, German expenditure on armaments was approaching £1,000 million a year. Finally, the quarrel between Italy and Abyssinia threatened the Stresa front and therefore the unity of those nations which alone could hold German ambitions in check.

Next the report argued that, whatever the reasons which had originally and still made 1942 seem to be the earliest possible date at which Germany would deliberately launch aggression, yet 1st January 1939 was the latest date which could reasonably be assumed for the purposes of Britain's own security, and therefore the date beyond which it would not be safe to postpone an effective state of preparedness. The argument here was that, guided by a purely rational estimate of chances, the German Government would still not declare war before 1942. But miscalculation or political errors of judgement might lead to war before that. And the Committee accepted the advice of the Foreign Office that 1st January 1939 was now reckoned to be—

'... the latest date which could reasonably be assumed for the purpose of our own security, and it could not be guaranteed that Germany would remain politically quiescent until then; to accept any date beyond 1939 would be to run a big risk.'

In the light of the two conditions already mentioned, the Committee's report then went on:

'Whether the year at which we aim is 1939... or 1942, we do not believe it is possible to achieve a state of preparedness which would constitute an effective deterrent or defence within the limits of increases of expenditure in the annual estimates of the Defence Services. We see no prospect of being able to submit acceptable or realisable programmes on that basis. We know that Germany is financing her preparations by loans on an immense scale, and that the same is being done in varying degree by other countries. If then this country is to equip itself adequately for its own security and to discourage aggression, we can see no alternative but for the Government to widen its horizon and to resort to some system of capital expenditure for this purpose.'⁽¹³⁷⁾

This report was next considered by the Ministerial Committee on Defence Policy and Requirements which was, at this stage, acting as the agent of the Cabinet.* The Ministerial Committee after considerable discussion formulated the following conclusions by the end of July:

'... without committing themselves in principle either as to the date, or as to the method by which the programmes of the Defence Services were to be financed, and without any assumption that it might not be possible to improve the international situation, the Committee agreed—

(i) To authorise the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee to work out, for their consideration, programmes on the assumption that by the end of the financial year 1938-39 each Service should have advanced its state of readiness to the widest necessary extent in relation to the military needs of national defence and within the limits of practicability;

(ii) The Sub-Committee in their Report should include answers to the following questions:

(a) what special measures would be required for increasing factory output so as to provide the material required within the period named, and what would be the cost of those measures?

(b) If no such special measures were taken as regards factory output, what state of preparedness would we be able to achieve by that date, or, alternatively, how long a period would be required to reach the same state of preparedness as in (a) above?

(iii) That the eventual decision of the Cabinet regarding the programmes of the Services would have to be taken on the widest review of the existing international financial and political considerations.^{†(138)}

Despite the extreme cautiousness of the language in which its terms of reference were couched, it is clear that the D.P.R. was embarking on a different sort of enquiry from that which it had undertaken in November 1933. A sense of urgency was at last creeping in. Deficiency programmes were now passing into the stage of genuine rearmament. Before this new report was ready in November 1935, however, critical developments had taken place in the international scene. And those developments must be considered before looking in detail at the next rearmament programme.[†]

* In future referred to as the D.P.R.C. or D.P.R. The following Ministers formed this Committee: R. Macdonald (Chairman), N. Chamberlain, Halifax, Cunliffe-Lister, Hoare, Eyres-Monsell, Runciman, Eden, the Chiefs of Staff, Hankey (Sec.).

† See below, Chap. VI, Section 3.

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- (32) This point also seems to be implicit in the Earl of Avon's brief account of the Franco-Italian Agreement, *Facing The Dictators*, (London, 1962), pp. 122-23 146
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PART II
CHAPTER VI
THE ITALO-ABYSSINIAN WAR,
1935-36^{*(1)}

1. *Origins of the Dispute*

THE STRESA FRONT, already of doubtful value by the conference of April 1935 and shaken by the independent moves of both France and Britain soon afterwards, was breached—as it proved, irreparably—by the subsequent dispute and war between Italy and Abyssinia.

The relations of Abyssinia with Britain, France and Italy—those countries with territory adjacent to her—had been defined by a treaty of 1906, by Abyssinia's admission to the League of Nations in 1923, by an Italo-Abyssinian Treaty of Friendship and Arbitration of 1928, and by an Anglo-Franco-Italo-Abyssinian Treaty of August 1930 which attempted to govern the supply of arms and ammunition to the Government of Abyssinia. It was part of the Italian case, in the quarrel now boiling up between Italy and Abyssinia, that Abyssinia had broken parts of the last two treaties. Abyssinia was charged with constant discrimination against Italian nationals, particularly in economic matters, and also with repeated violations of the arms agreement through illegal sales and evasion of agreed controls. All this was exacerbated by frontier incidents. These latter culminated in the notorious *Walwal* incident of December 1934, which was, in fact, worse than its predecessors only in the numbers of troops involved and in the number of casualties. The Italians promptly presented heavy and humiliating demands for compensation to the Abyssinian Government, whereupon the Abyssinians invoked the arbitration procedure provided for by the 1928 treaty and, upon rejection by the Italians, informed the League of what happened. From then on the dispute became, unavoidably, of international significance.

* The political story of this affair has been limited, in this chapter, to a background designed to provide a framework for strategic matters, both domestic and foreign. For that reason the Hoare/Laval talks of December 1935 are mentioned only briefly; strategic considerations were not directly affected by those talks, and indirectly only by the postponement of negotiations about oil sanctions.

During the session of the League Council in January 1935 M. Laval and Mr. Eden managed to get both Italy and Abyssinia to agree to try to reach an amicable settlement of their territorial disputes under the 1928 Treaty provisions, and the League Council therefore postponed consideration of the matter until the following May. Direct negotiations between the two Powers, however, had no result. On 17th March Abyssinia formally appealed to the League and later—with Italian military preparations undiminished—tried in vain to get the dispute included on the agenda of the extraordinary session of the League Council which was to follow the Stresa Conference in mid-April. But, once more, both France and Britain, anxious above all to preserve good relations with Italy in face of a rearming Germany, were loth to accede to the Abyssinian request; and the Council was thereupon content to abide by renewed assurances from both Abyssinia and Italy that they would meanwhile use the conciliation procedure. The dispute, so far as the League was concerned, thus remained on the May agenda.⁽²⁾ Thus, almost from the beginning, France and Britain assumed the role of intermediaries which they were to maintain for the rest of the year. This they did with the object of enabling a settlement acceptable to the League to be reached by negotiations behind the scenes, in the hope of keeping the temperature down by avoiding prolonged public debate.

Negotiations went on, within and outside the League, during May to August 1935. Concessions were offered to Italy who was, in turn, warned that the only kind of acceptable settlement was one agreed to by Abyssinia and made with the approval of the League. On 15th August representatives from Italy, France and Britain met in Paris. Baron Aloisi, the Italian representative, suggested as a basis for discussion Franco-British public recognition of Italy's need for expansion and her special position, economic and political, in Abyssinia; economic concessions, moreover, were of no value to Italy unless they could be backed by a military garrison. In return Italy would co-operate at Geneva. Mr. Eden thereupon made it quite clear that Britain could not endorse an Italian military and economic occupation of Abyssinia. The French and British delegates then drew up a draft programme as a basis for discussion, suggesting collective assistance by all three Powers in the economic development and administrative reorganisation of Abyssinia; the independence and integrity of Abyssinia would be maintained, but account would be taken of Italy's special interests without prejudice to the existing and recognised rights of France and Britain.⁽³⁾ On 18th August Mussolini turned down the offer as unacceptable to Italy from every point of view.

With this the Three Power Conference broke up. The conclusion

that Italy intended aggression could not be avoided; and the Governments of member states of the League were accordingly faced with the need to decide what to do should they be asked to take action against Italy under the terms of the Covenant.

2. *British Defence Plans and Preparations before the War*
August-September 1935

H.M. Government had in fact been examining detailed plans for military action, should war against Italy actually come about, since early August.⁽⁴⁾

The Ministers who assembled on 6th August to discuss policy for the forthcoming Three Power Conference in Paris asked the Chiefs of Staff to examine the military position if Italy defied the League, and to consider whether there was anything which ought to be done to meet this eventuality; the Foreign Office would not object to relatively modest steps, such as raising Malta A/A defence to the approved scale, even if the news of such steps became public.⁽⁵⁾ Hitherto the Chiefs of Staff had confined themselves to emphasising that even limited sanctions might involve Britain in war with Italy, and that it was necessary for the fullest Service preparations, such as special naval dispositions, reinforcements for Malta, Aden, Egypt and possibly Sudan and Kenya, to be complete before any sanctions were imposed. They had also stressed the great importance of practical co-operation with other countries particularly France, Greece and Turkey.⁽⁶⁾

In drawing up the new report asked for by Ministers on 6th August the Joint Planning Staff noted that if diplomatic efforts did not succeed in getting France to co-operate actively in sanctions, Britain would presumably not act alone; if, however, France did co-operate, there would be an ever present danger of war should Italy be unwilling passively to accept economic pressure against her.⁽⁷⁾ The Joint Planners assumed that the object of a war against Italy, however it arose, would be the limited one of forcing her to desist from aggressive action against Abyssinia; but although it would presumably be the League's intention not to employ more force than necessary to achieve this object, the scope of operations might be determined by Italian counter-action.⁽⁸⁾ That being so, they repeated that it was essential to take full military precautions even if the League decided only on economic sanctions, since there was no certain forecast of Italy's reactions to any particular League policy. It would be necessary to interrupt the sea communications of the Italian East African Forces with the home country. That could, in practice, be done by closing the Suez Canal, although such action would involve the co-operation of France and of some other

Powers, and might not in any case prove effective because use of the Canal could not legally be denied to shipping.* It would probably be better to establish contraband control; this would avoid closing the Canal but would necessitate the use of belligerent rights. If this were done America might be obstructive if measures at sea went beyond her view of the proper limits of belligerent rights and Japan might seize the opportunity of Britain being embroiled in Europe to act aggressively in the Far East. Contraband control centres could be set up in the Aden area, in the Gulf of Suez clear of the Canal zone, and, if necessary, at Gibraltar and in the Aegean. After a short time this would probably force Italy to abandon her operations in Africa and evacuate her troops already there. But, owing to the many exits from the Aegean, proper control could not be established without the use of Greek or Turkish bases such as Suda Bay or Mitylene, and contraband control in the Red Sea would mean the provision of naval craft and air reconnaissance for patrol and interception and also a covering force sufficient to deal with Italian naval attacks or attempts to reinforce East Africa. The task of containing the main Italian Fleet in the Mediterranean would fall to a combined international fleet which would probably best be divided by the French being largely responsible for the Western Basin and the Royal Navy for the central area.⁽⁹⁾

Likely Italian reactions to these moves would be air attacks on Malta, Egypt and the Canal zone, attacks on shipping which could be serious if Italy adopted unrestricted submarine war, but most probably no land threat to Egypt since Italy's Libyan troops would be heavily committed to operations further south.⁽¹⁰⁾

Passing on this appreciation to the Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff added their own general observations.

'We think it necessary,' they wrote, 'to call attention to the general strategical situation which may arise as the consequence of war against Italy. If the Fleet is involved in active operations, in spite of the co-operation of the French and other Navies it must be expected that losses will ensue, and the resultant situation will be that the British Fleet, already weak, will be still further reduced.'

There is bound to be a danger, therefore, that the results of a war with Italy would be to leave the British Fleet temporarily weakened to such an extent as to be unable to fulfil its world-wide responsibilities.

Similarly, the despatch of an air contingent from this country and the possible losses it may suffer will materially affect the air

* Under Article 1 of the Suez Canal Convention the signatory Powers agreed 'not in any way to interfere with the free use of the Canal in time of war as in time of peace', and the Canal was never to be blockaded.

defence of Great Britain and disjoin the arrangements at present in hand for attaining air parity with Germany by April 1937; moreover the existing arrangements for the reinforcement of Singapore could not be counted upon in case of an emergency of the kind now under consideration.

We desire most clearly to emphasise the statement in paragraph 75(b):

"At least two months' notice is required before all our forces can be considered as able effectively to co-operate . . . on a war basis."

It is of the utmost importance that in our future negotiations with France and Italy, and at the forthcoming League meeting, no action should be taken likely to precipitate hostilities, and that the application of the Covenant of the League, or indeed any action likely to cause Italy to take the bit between her teeth, should be delayed until the Services have had sufficient warning in which to make their preparations.

Any idea that sanctions can be enforced whenever diplomatically desirable is highly dangerous from the point of view of the Services, and we urge that no measures almost certain to lead to war, such as the closing of the Suez Canal, should be taken until the Services are prepared.

In view of the length of time which will inevitably elapse before all the Services are ready, and having in view the publicity which will inevitably accompany some of the steps to be taken, we ask for decisions at the earliest possible date as to when the recommended measures are to be taken.

Finally, we desire to stress that the moral and political co-operation of France is not sufficient. Her assured military support, concerted with ourselves *before* the League Council meeting of the 4th September, is essential. Without that, there is great risk of all active measures, together with the onus which they will carry with them, falling on ourselves alone with serious consequences.¹⁽¹⁾

These observations are worth looking at carefully. They are typical of the advice given to the Cabinet by the Chiefs of Staff throughout the crisis. It will be noted that the Chiefs of Staff did not consider—as they did not at any time—that Britain would suffer defeat in a war against Italy. It was entirely proper and reasonable, however, that they should ask for time to put Britain's forces on a war basis; up to date Italy had been included among the three Powers against whom hostilities had not been contemplated. To that extent the present crisis posed problems not merely in terms of Britain's general unpreparedness for war, but also in terms of war in an unexpected theatre. Again, ever since 1924 the Chiefs of Staff had warned Ministers of Britain's peculiar liabilities in any system of world

security; it was to be expected that they would now insist on help from others, and particularly from France. In any case, they had not so far been asked to examine the risks of a one-to-one war against Italy. Finally, their emphasis on the probable effect of losses in a Mediterranean war on what had been assumed to be more urgent preparations against Germany and Japan raised once again the by now traditional strategic problem of war on several fronts even if not occurring simultaneously.

This Chief of Staff appreciation was not considered in detail by Ministers until towards the end of August, after the failure of the Three Power Conference in Paris and with a telegram from Mr. Eden before them stressing the importance of at least some precautionary measures.⁽¹²⁾ The Cabinet were, on the whole, opposed to mobilisation of military and naval reserves. But subject to this limitation, the following precautionary measures were decided upon:

- (i) *Navy*. All preparations short of war were to be made at once. The Home Fleet was to assemble on 29th August, but was not to sail for the Mediterranean until further instructed. The Mediterranean Fleet was to be reinforced by an aircraft carrier, two destroyer flotillas, and one submarine flotilla. And it was to move from Malta to the east Mediterranean after 29th August.
- (ii) *Army*.
 - a. *Malta*. Malta defences were to be reinforced by 16 A/A guns and 12 searchlights; together with 6 guns and 12 lights to go initially to Malta, but destined ultimately for Mobile Naval Base Organisation. Coast defences were to be strengthened and extra ammunition supplied. But no additional battalions were to be sent, since this would involve mobilisation.
 - b. *Aden*. A/A guns were to be manned, and coast defences strengthened.
- (iii) *Air Force*. Five squadrons of Middle East Command were each to be increased by 6 aircraft and 6 pilots from home.

And it was emphasised that all this should be done as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. There was certainly no intention to try to coerce Italy by obvious preparations.⁽¹³⁾

The next step took place at a meeting of the D.P.R.C. on 5th September. The discussion at that meeting was on an Admiralty paper on naval strategy based on the assumption that the imposition of sanctions had led to war, that the Mediterranean Fleet had been still further reinforced and the Home Fleet moved to Gibraltar, that France was actively co-operating with Britain, and that Greece was allowing League Members the use of her ports. The paper visualised

Italy's general position as fundamentally weak. She was dependent for 76 per cent of her total imports on sea-borne trade, 62 per cent of which passed through Gibraltar, 3 per cent through Suez, and the remaining 11 per cent of which came from Mediterranean and Black Sea countries. With the Royal Navy at Gibraltar and Alexandria Britain could cut Italian communications with comparatively little effort, whereas Italy could only retaliate (apart from submarines which would not be decisive) by action far from her naval bases. This she was unlikely to attempt. Further, the mere closing to her of the Suez Canal by the presence of the Royal Navy might be decisive in an Abyssinian war in a measurable time. And as long as Britain held both exits from the Mediterranean she could, in time, probably force Italy herself to surrender.

Nevertheless, though the final outcome could not be in doubt, the problem of putting pressure on Italy was not as simple as it might appear. In the first place, she had for long been preparing for war against Abyssinia and generally strengthening her armed forces: Britain, on the other hand, had no base on the eastern Mediterranean to compare with the Italian base at Leros, and the Italian fleet was now to be taken seriously. Also Britain's general unpreparedness for war in narrow waters (hitherto a war with a Mediterranean naval power had not been envisaged) meant that the Fleet would be operating from bases, Alexandria and Malta, open to air attack and unprovided with the necessary scale of A/A defence.

Further, Italy was so strong in the central Mediterranean that, at any rate at first, Britain would have to re-route her through-Mediterranean trade and might be forced to abandon Malta, thereby facing difficulties in docking and repair facilities. The only suitable alternative to Malta was Alexandria, but this would rule out a quick finish to the war. A far more effective way would be to retain control of the central Mediterranean by having the use of a Greek mainland harbour (mysteriously known as Port X).^{*} Although steps would have to be taken to defend this port, the fact that Britain controlled the central Mediterranean would, apart from bringing quicker results, obviate the moral effect a British withdrawal from the Mediterranean might have on Italy, not to mention the probably adverse effect it would have had on League members and world opinion in general. In addition, Italy would be initially strong in the Red Sea and could therefore subject British war supplies to the eastern Mediterranean to attack, mainly by air; further, because of the diversion of British shipping from the Mediterranean route, such supplies would have to go via the Cape and the Red Sea. In

^{*} The Admiralty have unfortunately not been able to discover which Greek port was so designated although Navarino has been suggested. (Author's note).

time, however, this danger would peter out through Italy's lack of sea communications between her overseas possessions and the homeland.

Finally, the paper emphasised the importance of staff talks with France before any sanctions were enforced. In particular, the use or not of Port X would considerably influence French action, since if Britain had to relinquish the central Mediterranean the scale of attack against France might be greatly increased. And the paper emphasised, once again, that before any sanctions were imposed there must be time for further reinforcement of the Mediterranean Fleet and for the move of the Home Fleet.⁽¹⁴⁾

The D.P.R.C.—virtually speaking in the name of the Cabinet in these matters—then came to certain conclusions about sanctions, and the war likely to arise out of them, which remained the basis of British policy throughout the dispute.

'Sanctions—A Precaution

(a) That, amid the general desire to accomplish something effective at Geneva, we must be on our guard against the adoption of any form of economic or other sanctions which might turn Italian resentment especially strongly against this country and even be made a pretext for an attack on ourselves alone. . . .

(b) That, in order to provide a safeguard against the risk of such an attack, the adoption of sanctions must be made conditional on a clear understanding that if Italy, as a consequence, should attack any of the nations concerned, all the participating nations will declare war on Italy. . . .

(c) That, in particular, as a condition of the acceptance of sanctions, we must have a clear understanding with France as to the action she will take in the event of an Italian attack on the interests of the United Kingdom; also, if possible, with Yugoslavia and Greece.

(d) That, so far as at present can be judged, the right moment for raising the question with France would be if and when the Council of the League (probably through a Committee) takes up the examination of sanctions.'⁽¹⁵⁾

The next day, 6th September, the Chiefs of Staff, thinking the naval aspect had got ahead of the preparations of the other Services, discussed strategy more generally. And to do this they took into consideration a Joint Planning Staff examination of the air aspect of the Admiralty's strategy.⁽¹⁶⁾ During this discussion there was some difference of opinion. For Port X, the Chief of the Air Staff thought the best defence was the indirect one of helping France attack Italian sources of aircraft production, largely in the Turin area. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Chief of Naval Staff on

the other hand, preferred to leave this to France, and to concentrate British air efforts on more direct support of the Fleet. The Chief of the Air Staff, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff thought Britain might have to face abandoning Malta; the Chief of Naval Staff thought complete evacuation impossible, and persuaded his colleagues accordingly.⁽¹⁷⁾ Eventually they drew up a report for Ministers in which they asked for definite decisions whether or not Britain was to use Port X and defend Malta. They recommended both on the assumptions, first of whole-hearted French co-operation, with France responsible for the western Mediterranean excluding Gibraltar and, with Yugoslav help, mainly responsible for an air offensive against northern Italy; and second, of a clear understanding with the other League nations before sanctions were imposed. They gave an account of present reinforcements and then made further suggestions. The Mediterranean Fleet was in Eastern Waters and important reinforcements for it had passed Malta. The Home Fleet plus 2 flotillas was ready at Portland at short notice. A/A guns and lights were on the way to Malta, and anti-submarine defences, would soon be ready for the use of the Mediterranean Fleet at any temporary base it might occupy. One fighter squadron had gone to Malta and further reinforcements from Middle East Command were on the way.⁽¹⁸⁾ This improvement would be enhanced by the latest dispositions approved by Ministers on 5th September.* But more was needed and the Chiefs of Staff recommended that more aircraft, fighters, torpedo bombers and flying boats, be sent to Malta, Gibraltar, Alexandria and Aden.

On 11th September the D.P.R.C. confirmed the Chiefs of Staff's basic assumption and decided to plan to use Port X and defend Malta.⁽¹⁹⁾ Ministers also now asked the Chiefs of Staff to prepare an appreciation on the possibility of Italian aggression involving Britain in a single-handed war against her. So far, the broad assumption had been of a war in combination with League allies.

In a paper prepared in response to this last instruction the Chiefs of Staff argued that Mussolini was unlikely to choose to take belligerent action against Britain, since this would involve the removal of large forces from the Abyssinian campaign and would in any case in the long run not be successful: even if he did attack Britain, however, it was extremely improbable that the latter would remain single-handed for long. And if Britain were forced to wage such a one-to-one war, Italy's communications could be cut so as to make her position in East Africa an unenviable one, and before long force her to surrender there for lack of supplies. The consequent loss of the large army which Italy had built up in East Africa might well

* See above, p. 192.

produce so serious an effect on the Italian people as to bring the war to an early end. If, however, Mussolini was able to overcome this demoralisation, it would be necessary to examine other ways of bringing pressure to bear upon him. So far as economic pressure was concerned, although Britain could seal off both ends of the Mediterranean she could not single-handed control Italy's land communications nor stop her sea-borne communications with France, Yugoslavia, Greece, the Black Sea and, to a lesser extent, Tunis. Britain could not, therefore, rely on economic pressure and naval action alone to bring Italy to her knees in a reasonable time. Nor, single-handed could much pressure be exerted either by the Army or the R.A.F. There was no question of direct military attacks on Italy; and in the main, apart from an air offensive from Port X against Italian air bases in southern Albania, southern Italy and Leros, the rôles of the Army and the R.A.F. would be those of defence and co-operation with the naval plan.

Again, in a single-handed war, the Home Fleet would be responsible for the western Mediterranean, and would be based on Gibraltar. In the eastern Mediterranean the problems facing Britain would not be much different from those that would face her if she were co-operating in a war of the League against Italy, except that Britain's case for action in the Canal Zone and for the use of Egypt as a base would be the more delicate since it would be based on her national needs instead of those of the League. In the central Mediterranean the advantages to Italy would apply in greater measure in a single-handed war than in a League one, and it would be more than ever important for Britain to retain control. This would hinge on the effectiveness or otherwise of Italian air attacks on bases either at Malta or Port X, both of which would be subject to far greater scales of attack than in a League war. Port X would be more important than ever and would have to be seized if necessary in spite of the political disadvantages of such high-handed action; one infantry brigade with attached troops would suffice.

In other words, the Chiefs of Staff certainly did not argue that even a single-handed war against Italy would be disastrous for Britain. Indeed, they took it for granted, as we have seen, that Italian forces in Eritrea and Somaliland could be cut off completely from their sources of supply and compelled to surrender. But, if Italy persisted beyond that point, they foresaw some serious difficulties. Economic action, by Britain on her own, was most unlikely to bring Italy to her knees, and there was little chance of the Army and the Air Force bringing much additional pressure to bear. On the naval side they gave a warning that —

'from a purely strategical point of view it is an improper naval undertaking to conduct a war mainly with the Navy in the

narrow waters of the Mediterranean . . . if it is likely to be . . . prolonged.⁷

It was, nevertheless, vital to control the central Mediterranean and to have the use of Port X. They then ended with this further warning.

'The results would possibly involve a serious weakening of the power of our Fleet to fulfil its world responsibilities, and, if a single-handed war should be forced upon us, an extensive building programme in all classes of ships should *at once* be undertaken . . . Since the pressure of a single-handed war would tell with greater effect on Italy than on ourselves, and in view of our superior fighting qualities, we have no doubt as to the ultimate issue. Nevertheless, it is highly desirable that allies should be secured. In a single-handed war especially we might suffer considerable exhaustion and our resources for fulfilment of our wider responsibilities might be seriously impaired. All this reinforces the recognised need for a large increase in the size and efficiency of our defence forces and defences.'⁽²⁰⁾

On 17th September this appreciation was discussed by Ministers who decided that, at present, it was not desirable to have formal negotiations with other countries on military action in the event of Italian aggression, but that there was no reason why the Admiralty and the French Ministry of Marine should not exchange information on emergency arrangements. They also sanctioned those air and army reinforcements for Egypt, Aden and the Sudan already recommended by the Chiefs of Staff. In doing so, the Committee took into consideration the Foreign Secretary's opinion—in the light of his recent visit to Geneva—that the League as a whole was with Britain and that she could anyway count on France, Yugoslavia and Greece.⁽²¹⁾

This strategic background remained unchanged up to the Italian attack on Abyssinia. But there were some detailed developments within the framework. The D.P.R. approved proposals—not entirely adequate but the best possible—for manning the Fleet without mobilisation. And the day before the Italian invasion of Abyssinia they decided, for political reasons, against moving the Home Fleet, but approved the despatch of 5 submarines and a depot ship from the United Kingdom and 4 submarines from China.⁽²²⁾ Reports of Italian purchases of war stores for Libya led to reconsideration of plans for the defence of Egypt.⁽²³⁾ The Committee at first authorised the despatch of one infantry brigade and increases in the personnel of the 6 battalions already there. They then asked the Indian Government to hold two infantry brigades in readiness, authorised talks with the Egyptian Army and the despatch of 33 light tanks and

100 transport vehicles, and agreed that the cavalry regiment due to pass through Egypt on its way to India at the end of November should stay there if necessary. The Committee also approved a very lengthy Admiralty/Board of Trade report on the effect on Britain's Mediterranean trade of a war with Italy, which came down in favour of diversion via the Cape in spite of the confusion, delays and possibly permanent loss of trade this would entail.⁽²⁴⁾ And they finally approved in principle recommendations to accelerate production of A/A ammunition by increasing sources of supply by such means as expanding Government factories and providing additional plant for pivotal centres and armaments firms, although even so it would be some months before there was any appreciable additional output.⁽²⁵⁾

3. *The League and Sanctions, September-October 1935*

To return briefly to the political aspect of the story. With the failure of the Three-Power Conference in Paris, League members were faced with deciding their course if asked to declare their attitude to application of the Covenant. On 22nd August the Cabinet—recalled from holiday—discussed policy after a preliminary meeting of Ministers, the day before, to clear the ground.

Under Article XVI of the Covenant member States undertook to subject any other member who had resorted to war in disregard of its obligations to the severance of all trade and financial relations. Further, the Council of the League must recommend what military, naval or air contribution members should make to any armed forces that might be necessary to protect the Covenant, and members must mutually support each other in resisting any special measures aimed at one of their number by the Covenant-breaking State. Finally the aggressor could, by unanimous vote of the Council, be declared no longer a member of the League.

Subsequent League deliberations on the interpretation of this article produced certain rules for guidance which, although they were never formally adopted as amendments owing to lack of the requisite numbers of ratifications, nevertheless constituted the Assembly's provisional recommendations. In effect they watered down Article XVI by saying that the unilateral action of an aggressor State did not necessarily create a state of war; all it did was entitle other members to resort to war with the aggressor although, at least at the outset, it would be in accordance with the spirit of the Covenant to attempt to avoid war and restore peace by economic pressure. Further, it was the duty of each member individually to decide for itself whether the Covenant had been broken, even though any case of an alleged breach must be referred urgently to the Council, which

would then give its ruling by votes excluding those of the aggressor and of the victims.

In considering these matters the Cabinet in London were cautious, but ultimately decided that Britain's delegates at Geneva should reaffirm their country's loyalty to her obligations. At the same time these representatives must keep in step with France, avoid any commitments she was not equally prepared to assume, and take care to avoid trying to urge other nations further than they were willing to go. And they must make it clear that any action decided upon must be collective.⁽²⁶⁾

In reaching this decision the Cabinet had, among other papers, taken into account a special investigation by a C.I.D. Sub-Committee into the application of Article XVI to Italy. This paper, after discussing in some detail Italy's economic position and susceptibility to pressure and also the likely attitude of member and non-member States, reached the conclusion that collective economic and financial sanctions would, as far as imports into Italy were concerned, be successful in a reasonable time only if accompanied by the exercise of belligerent rights and an effective stoppage of sea-borne trade. Financial pressure in the form of prohibition of loans and credits and the severance of financial relations would be ineffective, since Italy was already unable to borrow abroad, and did not derive any large income from foreign investments: the effect of trying to cut off Italian exports could not be estimated but would be seriously diminished by the non-participation of Germany, the United States and the Argentine.⁽²⁷⁾ Finally, at the same emergency meeting the Cabinet decided not to raise the embargo on arms for Italy and Abyssinia, partly so as to present a united front with France who was keeping hers in force, partly to avoid giving the Duce an excuse for a *coup de main* against British interests, and partly because a change of policy might give the impression Britain had no hope of a peaceful outcome, 'though the Cabinet recognised that there was no longer much prospect of a pacific issue'. A change would in any case make little difference to Abyssinia who could not pay for arms in any quantity.⁽²⁸⁾

Immediately before the League meeting in early September Mr. Eden saw M. Laval in Paris. A French Cabinet meeting had been held at which the chief concern, now that war between Italy and Abyssinia seemed inevitable, was to prevent its spread to Europe. The French were anxious, therefore, if discussion of sanctions could not be avoided, at least to postpone them till the last possible moment. At the meeting Laval, though clearly uncomfortable, did not dissatisfy Eden on the whole. He was emphatic that he would have nothing to do with anything in the nature of a naval blockade, and did not seem very hopeful that economic sanctions would work: but

he was prepared to consider the extension of an embargo to include vital minerals, rubber and oil, and was not unalterably opposed to refusal of Italian exports.⁽²⁹⁾

The League Council met on 4th September. On 5th September it appointed a Committee of Five—the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Spain and Turkey—‘to make a general examination of Italo-Abyssinian relations and to seek for a pacific settlement’. Italy had agreed to this only after persuasion, but she refused a request by the new Committee, to which Abyssinia agreed, for an undertaking by both countries to do nothing to endanger the Committee’s work. In fact this work was carried out against the background of menacing gestures by Italy, including an exchange of addresses between Hitler and the new Italian Ambassador in Berlin with allusions to Italo-German co-operation and community of interests.

While the Committee of Five was deliberating Sir Samuel Hoare had a series of meetings with other delegates. The most important of Hoare’s meetings were the three he had with Laval. From the record of these meetings⁽³⁰⁾ there does not seem to have been—as has been suggested elsewhere⁽³¹⁾—any understanding in the sense of a deal, between the two Ministers. Nor, ‘in order to coax out of M. Laval a reluctant consent to align himself with his British colleague to the extent of advocating the imposition of an imperfect set of economic sanctions’, did Hoare agree to put on one side, for the time being, any consideration of military sanctions. The question of military sanctions did not, according to the League’s provisional interpretation of Article XVI, as yet arise. And the question of military sanctions, as distinct from unavoidable unilateral action by Britain, had not been considered by the British Cabinet. All they had done so far was to consider the conditions of war against Italy in general terms, and to make preparations for hostilities which might occur even without any agreed League action.

The effect of debates within the League Assembly from 11th to 14th September was, apparently, to array world opinion against Italy. And, in this process, Hoare’s speech at the first meeting was of outstanding importance. The danger, as has been pointed out elsewhere, was that in reaffirming so clearly the support of his Government and of the British people for the system of collective security, the Foreign Secretary ran the risk of misleading other members and public opinion generally by giving the impression that Britain would fulfil her obligations by action effective enough to frustrate the aggressor. Such action might well, in fact, imply war.⁽³²⁾ It is, of course, true that the Foreign Secretary insisted that the burden of obligation to enforce the League’s decision was a collective one; and in its private discussions the British Government had all along been clear on that point. But that qualification tended to be over-

shadowed by the more positive elements in the speech. And, unfortunately, as we have seen, H.M. Government had not considered the problem of war against Italy within the full context of collective security, i.e. on the basis of detailed collaboration with a number of other States. What is more, in all their discussions and preparations British Ministers had been consistent and agreed in the view that war was almost the last solution they sought.⁽³³⁾

At this point, as the Foreign Secretary explained to the Cabinet on his return from Geneva, he considered that the greater risk of war was liable to—

'arise out of the probable lifting of the embargo on the export of arms to Abyssinia by the various nations whenever Italy was declared in the wrong. In that contingency it was quite conceivable that a serious incident might arise if Italy should claim belligerent rights and seize a ship carrying munitions.'

The difficulty was that this risk could not be calculated exactly. Therefore, although the Foreign Secretary was confident of French, Greek and Yugoslav help as he had not been before the League meetings, and to that extent advised the Cabinet that he considered a single-handed war of Britain against Italy much less likely than it had previously seemed to be, he also went on to say that—

'at the present stage it was diplomatically extremely difficult to go very far in making precise arrangements, as the very fact of our making enquiries made nations think we were anxious.'

Accepting this advice, the Cabinet decided—

'that, in the present circumstances, it was not desirable to enter into formal negotiations with other countries as to the precise action to be taken in the event of an Italian aggression.'

although they did not object to informal talks at Naval Attaché level.⁽³⁴⁾

On 2nd October—the eve of the Italian attack on Abyssinia—the Cabinet met to discuss policy for the League Council Meeting a few days later. On this occasion Ministers agreed explicitly that military sanctions were out of the question in view of the attitude of the French Government. Indeed it was doubtful whether France would agree even to really effective economic sanctions. Laval's idea was for action in two stages, first to refuse to sell to Italy war material and perhaps certain 'key' minerals, secondly to refuse Italian exports. After considerable discussion on the relative advantages of imposing the strongest available sanctions from the outset or

of starting lightly and increasing if necessary, the Cabinet, a little less cautious than before, came down in favour of imposing the maximum on which agreement could be secured: but it recognised that that amount would depend on other nations, whether members of the League or not, and on what would prove practicable after international investigation.⁽³⁵⁾

The League Council, meeting again on 5th October, started by recognising its urgent duty of drawing attention to obligations under the Covenant, but for the moment the only recommendation it made was the innocuous one that any violation of the Covenant should be brought to an end. It then set up a Committee of Six—The United Kingdom, Chile, Denmark, France, Portugal and Roumania—to study the facts of the present position so that the Council could take further decisions with full knowledge. In due course this new Committee concluded that the Italian Government had resorted to war in disregard of its obligations under the Covenant of the League of Nations. On 7th October the Council—excluding Italy—accepted the conclusions of the Committee of Six and adopted the report of the Committee of Thirteen* stating the facts and circumstances of the dispute and the legal considerations, and informed the Assembly and all League members accordingly. Thus, for the first time, the Council had declared a League member—and a Great Power at that—to be an aggressor in terms which obliged every member concurring in the finding to apply the sanctions prescribed in the Covenant.

Further, before adjourning on 11th October the Assembly established a Co-ordination Committee to deal with the application of sanctions.⁽³⁶⁾

4. *Military Co-operation and Staff Talks, September 1935-January 1936*

Meanwhile, early in September the French Government had asked H.M. Government, officially, if France could be assured of Britain's immediate and effective co-operation in the event of a violation of the Covenant and a resort to force in Europe. And the question was framed generally, i.e. whether the aggressor was any member of the League, not Italy in particular. H.M. Government replied in the terms of the Foreign Secretary's Geneva speech. Britain stood for maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, by collective action, and particularly for steady and collective resistance

* The Committee of Thirteen, i.e. of all States represented on the Council other than the parties to the dispute, was appointed on 26th September 1935 to draft a report on the dispute under Article XV, para. 4 of the Covenant. Article XV had become applicable to the dispute on 4th September.

to acts of unprovoked aggression. But the Cabinet safeguarded itself by reserving definition of the precise British attitude or action to be taken in any particular case.⁽³⁷⁾

Towards the end of September Britain put her own version of a similar question. It was a moment when the French attitude was more than usually doubtful. Laval was vacillating over sanctions, was clearly for conciliating Italy, and there was very considerable uncertainty whether France could be relied upon to intervene on Britain's behalf if the latter were attacked by Italy in the Mediterranean. Ministers agreed that, before entering into any formal sanctions, they must make sure of the whole-hearted support of League members, and must have a clear understanding that an isolated attack on British forces or interests was to be regarded as an attack on all League members, in particular France. Accordingly the Foreign Secretary asked the French Ambassador what his Government's attitude would be if a member of the League, one which had declared readiness to fulfil its obligations under the Covenant and was making the preparations necessary to that end, was attacked before Article XVI became applicable, i.e. before other League members were expressly bound to give the victim the support provided for in the Covenant: could the British Government, in such circumstances count on the same support from France as they would be entitled to when the article was applied?⁽³⁸⁾ The French reply to this awkward question was received on 5th October. It took the advantage given by the Foreign Secretary when (probably to be tactful) he had couched in general terms an inquiry really concerned with the particular contingency of an Italian attack on Britain. Therefore, in answering the question in the affirmative, the French reply defined the conditions in which the undertaking would be regarded as reciprocal, whether or not the aggressor was a member of the League: moreover, the undertaking ought only to take effect after a joint investigation had been made into the circumstances, and agreement reached on the precautionary measures strictly necessary and justifiable in order to prepare for ultimate League recommendations. In fact, in this bout of diplomatic fencing the French gained at least as many points as they lost.⁽³⁹⁾

Matters went a stage further with the prospective enforcement of Article XVI following the actual Italian invasion of Abyssinia. The provision for mutual support adopted by the League Co-ordination Committee as Proposal No. 5 was satisfactory as far as it went, which was really no more than to recall the general terms of the Covenant, but it left in doubt what was meant by 'co-operation' and this uncertainty was all the more disquieting because of Laval's attempts to find some way of conciliating Italy. The British Foreign Secretary therefore asked the French Government whether they,

like the British Government, interpreted their obligations as demanding assistance if action of a military character was aimed by the aggressor against a member of the League participating in economic and financial measures under Article XVI. If so, what would be the precise character of that assistance?

The French reply was again unsatisfactory. Laval agreed that France fully subscribed to the obligations of members of the League to support one another in resisting any special measures aimed at one of their number by a Covenant-breaking State, but made the reservation that, to justify this solidarity, it was necessary that the attack which brought it into play should not be caused by a fact outside the application of Article XVI: 'in the actual situation as presented by the British Government, the circumstances are such that they oblige the French Government to make a reservation as to the presence in the Mediterranean of British naval forces much in excess of the effectives normally stationed in that Sea. The Covenant-breaking State, actually Italy, could in effect allege that it was justified in seeing in this concentration a step going beyond the application of the step actually agreed upon at Geneva for the execution of Article XVI'. To make matters worse the French Admiralty had refused to discuss the question of co-operation with the British Naval Attaché. Small wonder that the Cabinet, in particular the Foreign Secretary and the First Lord, were alarmed. The Foreign Secretary suggested telling Laval that until the Cabinet were quite satisfied about the French attitude there could be no question of withdrawing, from the Mediterranean, any British reinforcements whose purpose was purely one of elementary safety, and whose number would have been fewer had Britain previously felt confident of naval co-operation by France. During the discussion feelings ran high against France, and the Cabinet authorised the Foreign Secretary to send a stronger message than he had suggested in the first place.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Laval was, therefore, informed that the Cabinet disagreed with his interpretation of obligations since it ignored the fact that Britain was the country in peril, though quite unwarrantably so under all the League principles of collective action. If France persisted in placing any other construction on Article XVI, an article which, the Cabinet considered, could be interpreted in only one way, collective security would be rendered meaningless, and the consequences to the League and to Anglo-French relations very grave. The British Government must therefore repeat their request for a plain and unequivocal assurance of full support against any attack that might be made against them. In return they would assure France that they had no intention of initiating measures against Italy except in accordance with any League decision and fully shared in by France: and, further, that they were prepared to

withdraw two battle cruisers from Gibraltar if the French Government gave this assurance, and if Italy reduced her Libyan forces to approximate parity with the British garrison in Egypt. The note ended with the warning that, unless this suggestion was willingly and promptly accepted the consequences would be grave because they would imperil Locarno itself. Just as the French had in this case been able to explain away to themselves British precautions as provocative, so it would be easy for Britain in a number of imaginable contingencies to make reservations in regard to French precautions which would render the Locarno Treaty ineffective.

The French reply was received on 18th October.⁽⁴¹⁾ This time it was considered satisfactory although it contained some strictures on the British Government for not making known publicly their real intentions to limit sanctions, which would have prevented 'uncontrollable reactions by a section of French opinion', for using the withdrawal of cruisers from the Mediterranean as a bargaining point, and for submitting to the French Government a communication which harmonised 'neither in form nor in substance with the spirit of mutual confidence which in the present crisis is more than ever essential to the maintenance of unity of action between the British and French Governments.' However the reply did give the required undertaking:

'The Minister for Foreign Affairs confirms once again today to the British Ambassador that the French Government does not interpret in any other manner than does the British Government the extent of the mutual assistance arising out of Article XVI, paragraph 3, that is to say, that it certainly interprets the obligation prescribed for members of the League of Nations towards any one of them who should, as a result of measures taken in application of Article XVI, be exposed to attack by the Covenant-breaking State, as implying unlimited solidarity of action in the matter of military, air and naval assistance. . . .

As for the new question regarding the conditions for the application of the Covenant which would govern the actual enforcement of this "mutual support" . . . M. Laval had already had occasion . . . to indicate that he naturally interpreted this obligation as being governed by the measures taken in fulfilment of Article XVI, within the limits of its application.

The British Government . . . offers the French Government the assurance that it will not take the initiative in any measure against Italy which would not be in conformity with the decisions taken, or to be taken, by the League of Nations in full agreement with France.

Strengthened by this assurance—which, be it said, it never had reason to doubt—the French Government is in a still better position to confirm to the British Government, in the clearest and

most precise manner, than in the concrete case contemplated by the most recent communication from the British Ambassador, that is to say, a possible attack by Italy upon Great Britain by reason of the latter's collaboration in the international action undertaken by the League of Nations and pursued in concert with France, the French support of Great Britain is assured fully and in advance, within the framework of the interpretation . . . which the Governments of the two countries are in agreement in placing upon the obligation provided for in Article XVI of the Covenant.'⁽⁴²⁾

The next steps were the renewal of negotiations with the Italians for withdrawal of reinforcements from the Mediterranean and next, the opening of Anglo-French Staff talks. British reinforcement of the Mediterranean had evoked counter-action by Italy in the shape of reinforcements for Libya. Negotiations began between the two countries in September aimed, on the Italian side, at reducing British naval dispositions and, on the British side, at avoiding this but nonetheless inducing Italy to abstain from action which might lead to an Anglo-Italian war. In the event, no agreement with Italy was reached.⁽⁴³⁾

A little more progress was made in the matter of Anglo-French Staff talks. In reply to questions by the British Government, the French on 26th October agreed in the case of attack on Britain by Italy:

- '(i) To allow Britain the use of Biserta and Toulon.
- (ii) To arrange for the collaboration of their naval forces with the British in the Mediterranean subject to agreement on the conditions. To reach this agreement they suggested discussion between the Admiralty and the naval expert they were sending to London to deal with the general question of naval armaments.'⁽⁴⁴⁾

The proposed meeting took place on 30th October. Admiral Decoux pointed out that the discussion was purely preliminary, and that if serious Staff talks were to follow they would be carried out by the Deputy Chief of the French Naval Staff. But it seemed that the French Navy was prepared to co-operate as fully as circumstances permitted, and more especially to offer harbour and repair facilities in the fullest sense. From the French point of view the possible war would be one of all arms, and not mainly a sea and air war as it would be with Britain. They were much exercised about the unreadiness of their forces. Their plans were based upon the assumption of a German threat and 1936 was the earliest date by which, so it was thought, the German menace might become serious. More-

over, considerable French forces had been moved from the Mediterranean to the Channel following the Franco-Italian agreement at Rome in January 1935. Further, political considerations forbade mobilisation before a war broke out. The French Staff was, therefore, faced with a period of mobilisation after war had broken out against an Italy already largely mobilised and prepared for war. It would be essential to transport considerable numbers of troops from North Africa, for which British naval help would be necessary, and which would be much assisted if Spain would allow the use of her ports and railways. All in all, the French were so concerned with these difficulties that they wondered whether, in the event of war without previous warning, it might not be as advantageous to the League, as it certainly would be to France, for her not to declare war on Italy until after she was fully ready. In putting forward this suggestion, however, Admiral Decoux made it clear it was purely a practical proposition and not in any way an attempt to back out of giving assistance.

The British Chief of Naval Staff recommended acceptance of the French proposals. Politically it might be thought wise to get France committed irrevocably to us as soon as we were attacked, but against this was the necessity that would then arise to give her naval assistance. Moreover it was always dangerous to press a country to take military action against the advice of her technical advisers, since it might well lead to embittered relations at an early stage of Allied co-operation.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The First Lord and the Foreign Secretary endorsed these views and they were accepted by the D.P.R.C. on 5th November as the best Britain could hope for.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Nevertheless doubts remained. Mussolini's still intransigent frame of mind seemed to demand preparatory measures, but the French naval authorities showed reluctance to go any further, and indeed had only gone so far in great secrecy and by withholding knowledge from even their own Foreign Office. The D.P.R.C. agreed that Laval must now be told of what had been discussed so far, and that an attempt must be made to extend the discussions to the military and air staffs as well. The Service representatives on the Committee were alarmed that H.M. Government had moved so far away from their original decision not to get involved in sanctions without a cut-and-dried understanding with France: instead, with oil sanctions under discussion, Britain was becoming deeper involved, and the possibility of real co-operation with France seemed less likely than ever. Their doubts about France were echoed by the Prime Minister and by the Lord President, who thought there was a danger that Laval would allow talks to go on without any assurance that there would be authority for their practical implementation when need arose. Eventually the Committee agreed that Laval must be asked

to tell Mussolini that war with Britain meant war with France, and that he should further be asked to implement his promise by concrete action (e.g. the manning of air defences in the South of France without which Toulon would be valueless). At the same time Laval should be asked to authorise the resumption of naval talks and the inauguration of air and military talks.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Laval's answer was a categorical undertaking of co-operation which he repeated to the Italian Ambassador in Paris. Sir Samuel Hoare expressed himself pleased with this, but not all Ministers thought that even now the position was satisfactory and some of them urged caution over oil sanctions until binding arrangements had been made with France. Finally the Cabinet agreed that the Foreign Secretary should raise the question of Staff talks with Laval when he saw him in Paris on 7th December: it was urgently necessary to hold these talks before the question of oil sanctions was discussed at Geneva on 12th December. At the Hoare/Laval meeting—largely devoted to the terms of a peace plan—Laval agreed to military and air talks which accordingly began in Paris: naval talks were carried on in London with the French representatives to the Naval Conference then proceeding.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Issuing instructions for the air talks, the D.P.R.C. endorsed a Chiefs of Staff recommendation that the first thing to do was find out French intentions. If pressed, Britain would be prepared to send a contingent to co-operate with the French Air Force, but its size should at this stage be unspecified. The air talks—held on 9th and 10th December—were not a success. It became apparent that, apart from a system of frontier-watching, no other action whatever could be taken by the French Air Force without mobilisation, and the French Cabinet was obviously unlikely to authorise this before Italy had carried out some hostile act. After mobilisation the French would conduct operations against Sicily (which they did not consider would be effective), and against Tripoli from Tunisia, provided the reinforcements necessary for this were replaced in France by British units. Facilities in southern France were very limited and the French were, anyway, exceedingly reluctant to take any action against northern Italy unless their own country had first been attacked. It was, in fact, quite clear from the general tenor of the conversations that the French wanted to limit the war to the sea area of the Mediterranean and to avoid any action which would entail retaliation against France itself.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The Army talks, although not going very far, were more satisfactory. Once again action possible before mobilisation was limited; but it was clear that the French could, if they wished, (and they did at any rate agree to examine possibilities) take certain measures which would show they were prepared to help us and which would

commit them to standing by the United Kingdom on an equal footing. These measures comprised:

- (i) A frontier-watching system;
- (ii) A possible offensive against Tripoli from Tunisia.
- (iii) The raising of additional forces in the Levant.
- (iv) The defence of British and French Somaliland and of communications from Abyssinia to the sea by a joint Anglo-French force supported by Abyssinian troops. This would involve the problem of French reinforcements from Madagascar and Indo-China and British reinforcements from East Africa and India.

For the British part, as well as studying their share in (iv), they would look into the possibility of using the Iraq-Syrian route for reinforcements from India if necessary. Little progress was made in attempts to get the French anti-aircraft defence to take measures to meet air attacks.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Presumably because everything else was overshadowed by the crisis of the disclosure of the Hoare/Laval peace plan, the results of these talks were not considered by the Chiefs of Staff or by Ministers until 13th and 14th January 1936 respectively. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff—and he met with general agreement—was not in favour of sending British or Indian troops to defend Somaliland and Abyssinian communications before the French had themselves sent troops: the Staff study of the use of the Iraq-Syrian route was in progress but he thought it would prove a difficult, though not impossible, operation. Naval talks were continuing but—and this held good for the French Air Force too—it was obvious that although the French Navy was anxious to help, the French Government was standing in the way. In the circumstances Ministers now decided that no steps should be taken to reopen military and air talks: the naval conversations now in progress should be continued.⁽⁵¹⁾

From these latter there were some developments. The French agreed provisionally to be responsible for the naval control of the western Mediterranean except Gibraltar, and undertook to consider sending destroyers to Gibraltar to help in anti-submarine duties. They were told that, in the early stages, the Royal Navy would want to use only Toulon, and that only for repairs: later it might want Biserta and other North African ports for fuelling. And it turned out that the French would want Britain's help in transporting troops from North Africa to France only if Germany's attitude was hostile enough to merit larger troop movements than the two divisions needed for a possible Mediterranean war.⁽⁵²⁾

Meanwhile the possibility of negotiations with other countries had been raised. Although some preliminary approaches were made to Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey during November 1935, it was not until 6th December that the D.P.R.C. considered the question in detail, urged on by the Foreign Office. The relevant Chiefs of Staff paper⁽⁵³⁾ considered by the Committee emphasised the importance of getting a general assurance that all League States bordering on the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (except Albania) would go to war in the event of Italian aggression. Albania had not agreed to apply sanctions and, anyway, her neutrality might be of some advantage in that the Italians would not be able to operate from her territory. From Yugoslavia it was necessary to have assurances of naval co-operation in the Adriatic, of a military invasion of Istria and of co-operation generally with French land forces, of air action in the Adriatic, against northern Italy and, if possible, in the Straits of Otranto. From Greece, Britain wanted the use of such ports and harbours as were found necessary, dock and repair facilities at Piraeus and Salamis, facilities for Naval Control organisations at Athens and Salonica, aerodrome facilities in Greece, air co-operation in the Straits of Otranto, the Ionian Sea and Crete, military co-operation to prevent Italian overland attack on strategic harbours and aerodromes, and a general assurance of the defence of Crete against strong raids. With the warning that Turkey might immediately react to approaches by demanding the right to re-militarise the Dardanelles, the Chiefs of Staff suggested that, from her, Britain would need ports and harbours, docking and repair facilities, assistance in a Naval Control organisation at Constantinople, aerodrome facilities in south west Turkey, air co-operation in the Dodecanese and Aegean, and a general assurance of the use of the Anatolian railway if the need arose. From Roumania Britain needed dock and repair facilities at Constanza and Galatz, also oil and transit facilities. From Russia Britain required a statement on what naval and air assistance she would give in the League cause, and from Spain port, dock and repair facilities, also assurances about the defence of the Balearics, facilities for the defence of Gibraltar from the north, air co-operation in the western Mediterranean and base facilities, if needed, in southern Spain, North Africa and the Balearics.

The Chiefs of Staff then extended their terms of reference to include Poland, Germany, Hungary and Austria from whom they wanted assurances to guard against repercussions of League action which were likely to be felt over a wide field. And they ended by warning against the danger of political agreements on sanctions outrunning arrangements for military co-operation. It was essential that Britain alone should not be committed to risks for which others

were unprepared: countries agreeing to sanctions must be equally ready to meet any situation that might arise therefrom.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Ministers approved this paper as a general guide for the Foreign Office but left the priority of approach to the discretion of Mr. Eden, the Minister for League of Nations Affairs. During the discussion he had quoted the Foreign Office view that it might be premature, or even dangerous, to approach some of the nations mentioned by the Chiefs of Staff.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Negotiations were therefore at this stage confined to the most important, i.e. Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Spain. In due course Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey (after conferring with Roumania and Czechoslovakia) replied with complete and unconditional assurances of co-operation. Nevertheless there was some doubt about just what their co-operation would mean in practice.⁽⁵⁶⁾

As with the Anglo-French talks, and also presumably because of the temporary but overwhelming importance of the Hoare/Laval peace plan crisis, there was then a delay until mid-January 1936. On 14th January the D.P.R.C. authorised Staff talks with Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey on a more detailed footing, and the talks duly took place in February and March. Only from Turkey was there much satisfaction: the other two were willing but their defences, particularly those of Greece, were in a poor state. Britain, however, got the assurances she wanted for port and harbour facilities, and for aerodromes and air bases. And Turkey agreed to help in a Naval Control organisation at Constantinople. For her part, Britain replied to requests for material aid with a general assurance that she would fulfil her obligations in whatever form was most practicable if and when the need arose.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Meanwhile both France and Italy had been told of the assurances obtained from the three Powers. Italy had also been told of the Anglo-French talks, and Germany had been affecting to feel doubts about whether these Anglo-French discussions were consistent with the Locarno Treaty. On 22nd January 1936 (and these German doubts were one of the reasons for this move) all the countries concerned informed the League Co-ordination Committee of the negotiations that had taken place. And, at the same time, Czechoslovakia and Roumania told the Committee of their full agreement. The only absentee among Mediterranean members was Spain, with whom talks had met with no success, and who, on receiving copies of the various letters to the Co-ordination Committee, merely replied that she would always honour her engagements and that in this specific case, linked as it was with the applications of sanctions, if it proved necessary to study details then that should be done at Geneva. On 24th January Italy's protest at what had been done

was received not only by the countries immediately concerned but by all those participating in sanctions.⁽⁵⁸⁾

5. *British Defence Plans and Preparations during the war*

For the first few weeks after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia there was little change in Britain's own defence arrangements in Africa and the Middle East, apart from some strengthening of the garrison and anti-aircraft defences at Aden and the provision of some defence forces—hitherto entirely lacking—for Port Sudan. But even this was not done without sacrifices at home, without running very low in anti-aircraft ammunition reserves, and without using literally the last remaining reserve of trained anti-aircraft searchlight personnel. Making their recommendations for the improvement of Aden and Port Sudan, the Chiefs of Staff had ended:

'It will be seen . . . that in certain directions our available resources in this country, both in men and material, are now at bed rock. We consider that the needs of Aden and Port Sudan should be met, but we desire to call attention to the serious position which has been reached.'⁽⁵⁹⁾

In these circumstances the D.P.R.C. met on 26th November to hear from the Foreign Secretary that, in some respects, the political situation was more dangerous than it had been. Mussolini was in an intransigent mood, and there were many rumours that he might take action if sanctions were imposed of a kind that might humiliate Italy or threaten her national life. This bore directly on the proposed oil embargo.* It was, therefore, necessary to keep the defence situation under constant and urgent observation. In the general discussion that followed the Committee agreed that the War Office already had sufficient authority to accelerate to the maximum, within the normal peace-time system, the production of anti-aircraft ammunition: that being so, steps must be taken to bring up production considerably by 1st April next. On Egypt the Committee heard that the Chiefs of Staff had called for a joint appreciation by the three local Commanders, which was due shortly; but they decided to anticipate the requests the appreciation would inevitably contain, and to despatch at once the mobile forces considered necessary for defence against Italian attack from Libya.⁽⁶⁰⁾

On 2nd December Mr. Baldwin's Cabinet discussed the Italo-Abyssinian dispute for the first time since the General Election. They heard from the First Lord and the Secretary of State for Air of the state of preparedness in the Mediterranean area and pointed out

* See below, p. 217.

again what the Chiefs of Staff had earlier made clear that, although Britain was considered strong enough to obtain naval command in that theatre, she might well suffer serious losses in the process since her forces were not in a proper state of readiness for a war in a land-locked sea. As economic sanctions had been built up round the Fleet, some of those nations participating in sanctions might well show less alacrity if this weakness were known. And a further complication would be the reaction elsewhere to a Mediterranean war, particularly in the Far East, where the strategic position was no less dependent on the Navy.*

In the air Britain was even worse off than at sea, because although she had numerical parity with Italy, the Italian machines were thought capable of better performance. Moreover, British forces would be liable to attack simultaneously from different quarters so that interception would be difficult. There was no A/A defence available for Alexandria and no increase in the rate of output of machines and ammunition was possible beyond the normal peace-time conditions. All the Royal Air Force could do was to support the Navy and attack the enemy in Libya: the only way of diverting Italian air attacks on Egypt would be to wage an air offensive against northern Italy in conjunction with France. In discussion there was anxiety not only about the Mediterranean specifically but also about the effect on the expansion programmes for the Services which were then under consideration. The Foreign Secretary, although not pressing at this stage, gave notice that he would, on another occasion, ask whether remedies for deficiencies could not be speeded up. And it was also pointed out that, if Britain suffered losses in the Mediterranean, then this would lower the datum point from which the proposed expansion of the Services would start. Some Ministers argued, on the other hand, that the risk of Italian aggression was remote. Italy had by now given hostages to fortune. In the event of war against members of the League her armies in Abyssinia and in Libya, with their communications cut, would be in a precarious position. The Secretary of State for War, Mr. Duff Cooper, thought it was easy to exaggerate the importance of the shortage of anti-aircraft ammunition since the effectiveness of A/A guns was, in any case, doubtful and liable to be restricted further by adverse weather conditions.

But the tone of Ministers' comments was, on the whole, pessimistic. Naval and air defences in the Mediterranean, it was argued, were not in a proper condition for war, and an effort should therefore be made to settle on peace terms; the political situation had gone far beyond our own military preparedness. If Mussolini, on the other

* Moreover, naval strategy so far—and for all practical purposes for some time to come—was based on the assumption of complete freedom to use the Mediterranean to transfer the Fleet, if need arose, to the Far East.

hand, were to take military action against us it would not be a mere 'mad dog' act but based on some real plan. Therefore, in the circumstances earlier outlined by the Service Ministers, Britain ought not to face hostilities unless they were absolutely forced upon her. Britain's interest in the whole affair was not so much the dispute between Italy and Abyssinia, but rather the dispute between the League and an aggressor. The discussion was rounded off by the Prime Minister. If by any chance hostilities should come about, he argued, then there would be strong criticism of the Government at home unless it had previously done its utmost to avoid war; and that criticism would be all the more bitter once the detailed facts of our defensive preparations became known. Moreover, it should be remembered that, whatever was done to try to ensure collective League action, Britain would almost certainly have to withstand the first shock of a hostile Italian reaction to sanctions. Finally, if anything went wrong in dealing with Mussolini, no one would later be willing to tackle Hitler.

In view of all this it is hardly surprising that, while repeating their earlier decision to join in an embargo on exports of oil and also agreeing on an early continuation of Staff talks already begun with the French, Ministers decided to press on by every possible means with discussions designed to bring about a peaceful settlement of the dispute. In fact, war was to be avoided at almost any cost.⁽⁶¹⁾ And these were the views uppermost in the Foreign Secretary's mind when he went to Paris a few days later for what was to become his notorious last talks on Abyssinia with M. Laval. Little wonder that when news of those talks was (from the British point of view) so unexpectedly leaked to the press, Ministers in London were less concerned with matters of substance than method and certainly did not begin by assuming that the Foreign Secretary would need to resign.

Writing of these matters after the war of 1939-45 Lord Templewood (formerly Sir Samuel Hoare) said that—

'It was clear, however, from the occasional Cabinets that took place, that there was strong opposition both to military sanctions and an oil embargo that might lead to war. The Chiefs of Staff were particularly insistent that we were in no position to risk a war, and their opinion at this moment carried all the greater weight when it was supplemented by the fresh reports that we had just received about German rearmament.'⁽⁶²⁾

It is true that Ministers, generally, were against military sanctions or other types of sanction which might lead to war—although there were some exceptions, some Ministers who were not completely pessimistic about the military situation or apprehensive of what

Mussolini might do under pressure. It is also true that the Chiefs of Staff argued consistently, as did Ministers, that military action against Italy should be undertaken deliberately only in conjunction with France, and that such action would, in any case, weaken our position *vis-à-vis* Germany and Japan. But to imply, as Lord Templewood's words could possibly do, that it was the Chiefs of Staff who, by being 'particularly insistent' against military action, finally persuaded Ministers to the conclusions noted above, is not a view which is borne out by the documentary evidence. Both at the meeting of the D.P.R.C. on 26th November, when the Chiefs of Staff were present,⁽⁶³⁾ and at the Cabinet meeting on 2nd December,⁽⁶⁴⁾ it seems that it was just as much Ministers who were 'particularly insistent that we were in no position to risk a war'. In so far as risking a war implied a risk of post-war strategic problems which it would be virtually impossible to solve for years to come, in view of treaty limitations on naval strength, Ministers and their expert Service advisers were entirely of one mind. But the Chiefs of Staff did not doubt the short term successful outcome of such a war or give Ministers any reason to think that they did so.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Despite the doubts and anxieties expressed by Ministers at the Cabinet meeting of 2nd December about the state of the country's defences, they had no further discussion of the general aspects of defence problems until 25th February 1936, when the next major scheme for the expansion of the armed forces was considered by them for the first time.* In the meantime, however, there was some reconsideration of immediate strategic matters. An appreciation from the Commanders in the Middle East reached the Chiefs of Staff on 13th December. This left the broad strategic assessment unchanged, but brought in a new element by strongly recommending for a number of reasons, but mainly because of its greater safety from air attack, the use of Alexandria and not Port X as the main naval base as long as it was possible from Alexandria to achieve our strategic objectives of stopping Italy's sea supplies, cutting her communications with East Africa and Libya and carrying out our own offensive. The local Commanders went on to consider possible Italian action. She might attack Malta, the Sudan, British Somaliland and Kenya, and also lines of communication in the Red Sea, but British forces should only take such steps to meet these threats as did not interfere with the attainment of the main objectives. Italy's principal target would be the British Fleet and, since this would now be based on Egypt, the first duty of British land and air forces was to protect that country from external aggression and internal disturbances. To cope with the latter, one extra brigade was needed.

* See below, p. 254.

To deal with external aggression (which was likely to be limited to the establishment of advanced air bases to facilitate attacks on Cairo and Alexandria), it was important to organise the defence of the Western Desert as far forward as possible, ideally to go to the extent of capturing Tobruk. But, for this, at least an extra division was necessary; and the holding of Sollum would demand an additional brigade and artillery. As none of these reinforcements could be supplied without mobilisation, all that could be done at present was to protect landing grounds within 20 miles of the frontier. Even so, success could not be guaranteed, even temporarily, without mobile reinforcements (i.e. those already approved in anticipation by the D.P.R.C. on 26th November) and sustained operations would certainly not be possible. The A/A defence of Alexandria would however be greatly strengthened by the use there of the Mobile Naval Base Organisation originally intended for Port X.

The Chiefs of Staff endorsed these suggestions, in particular the abandonment of Port X and the use of Mobile Naval Base Organisation A/A guns and lights at Alexandria, provided these were re-embarked if the occupation of Port X should be decided upon later. This last proviso was to meet the Chief of Naval Staff's doubts whether control of the central Mediterranean could be continuously maintained. It might at a later stage be necessary to advance to Port X to press home the campaign, and the time might arrive—although none of the Chiefs of Staff were hopeful of this—when France would be in a position to develop pressure by attack from the air against Italy, thereby rendering Port X less vulnerable.⁽⁶⁶⁾

In mid-January 1936 approval was given for the despatch to Egypt of one A/A battery and two A/A searchlight sections. With these, and with reinforcements previously authorised, it was hoped that British forces in Egypt would be able to deal with any Italian threat by land from Libya, to maintain internal security in Egypt itself, and also to protect the Suez Canal so long as the Royal Navy remained in control of the eastern Mediterranean.⁽⁶⁷⁾ No further reinforcement of the Mediterranean theatre was now made directly because of the war between Italy and Abyssinia. Indeed some moves were fairly soon made in the opposite direction. It is true that the Cabinet supported the imposition of oil sanctions, despite the fact that the need for a more normal distribution of the nation's armed forces had been used by the Chiefs of Staff as an argument against such sanctions. Nonetheless some concession was made to the Chiefs of Staff view. On 17th February 1936, the Cabinet approved the retention at home of squadrons of the Royal Air Force being prepared for the Mediterranean, and the return home of such air personnel as were in the Mediterranean. Then, on 3rd March, Ministers agreed to the withdrawal of one capital ship from the

Mediterranean, and also to the relief of the naval Commander-in-Chief for other important duties.*

6. *The Final Stage: Oil Sanctions, November 1935-March 1936*

The last development in the war of significance for our purposes was the suggestion and discussion of a plan for the League to extend its actions against Italy by the imposition of an oil sanction. This, in so far as it threatened more effective action against Italy than had been taken hitherto, threatened also more violent retaliation by Italy and hence a greater risk of war.

An oil embargo had been approved in principle by the Cabinet in their general discussion of sanctions on 9th October 1935, when it had been decided to join in such an embargo if other oil producing or supplying nations did the same.⁽⁶⁸⁾ But although there was some talk of its inclusion in the League's five proposals for sanctions, it was not until 6th November that the Committee of 18 adopted as its 'Proposal No. 4A' the extension of the export embargo to:

'Petroleum and its derivations, by-products and residues; pig-iron; iron and steel (including alloy steels), cast, forged, rolled, drawn, stamped or pressed; Coal (including anthracite and lignite), coke and their agglomerates, as well as fuels derived therefrom.'

By 12th December, when after much postponement the Committee of 18 at last reassembled, 10 members—Argentina, British India, Czechoslovakia, Iraq, Finland, Holland, New Zealand, Roumania, Siam and Russia—had agreed to the new proposal. Among non-members the result was not unfavourable either, because the United States of America, which admittedly supplied only about 6.3 per cent of Italy's imports, was making every effort (though not always successfully) to ensure that any supplies in future were restricted to this level.

Meanwhile the announcement from Geneva that the Committee of 18 would reassemble on 29th November to discuss whether to put 'Proposal No. 4A' into practice had immediately sounded an alarm in the Italian Press, and there were rumours that Laval had been told by the Italian Ambassador that this extension of sanctions might reflect badly on Franco-Italian relations. Laval, pleading difficulties of internal politics, succeeded (with British acquiescence) in getting a postponement of the session of the Committee of 18. Italian alarm and resentment then crystallised into the announce-

* The C.-in-C., Admiral Sir W. Fisher now became C.-in-C., Portsmouth.

ment of certain troop movements and cancellation of leave, deliberately couched in such general terms as to leave uncertain whether the threat was to Britain or France: at the same time there were rumours of Italian retaliation, if the oil sanction was imposed, by an attack on Britain, particularly an air attack on the Mediterranean Fleet. Laval then obtained further breathing space by getting the meeting of the Committee of 18 arranged for as late as 12th December, and received his reward from the Italians by an announcement that there had been no troop movements towards the French frontier. On 30th November the Italian delegation at Geneva informed the members of the Committee of 18, other than Britain and France, that the implementation of 'Proposal No. 4A' would be considered 'an unfriendly act'.

Against this background the Cabinet on 2nd December heard the Foreign Secretary's advice. He was one of those Ministers not unduly alarmed about the likelihood of an Italian attack in the Mediterranean even though worried by obvious defence deficiencies and in spite of secret information that Italy genuinely intended to implement her threats if an oil embargo was imposed. Mussolini had said sanctions would be considered an unfriendly act, not a *casus belli*, and the recent barrage of peace moves on behalf of Italy was perhaps a sign of the way the wind was blowing. In any case Sir Samuel Hoare considered that it would be very difficult not to co-operate in enforcing an agreed oil sanction. Already active propaganda had started against us in the United States and in France for our failure to define our position and for leading in proposals for sanctions until our own interests were affected: moreover, having hitherto supported genuine collective action—and fought a General Election on this theme—a refusal now would be indefensible. But, all the same, Britain must take every precaution by continuing and extending staff talks with France, instituting similar talks with other Mediterranean Powers, by finding out what the United States was going to do about her oil exports to Italy and, finally, by pressing on with peace negotiations as rapidly as possible. On method, the Foreign Secretary was in favour of postponing the actual imposition of the oil embargo until it was seen how the peace talks developed.*

Ultimately the Cabinet followed the Foreign Secretary's advice and decided, while taking every precaution to safeguard British security, such as carrying out staff talks with France and with other Mediterranean Powers, to join in an oil embargo provided the other oil-producing League members did the same. They aimed at a decision in two stages, by confirming the principle at the forthcoming Geneva meetings but, (and preferably on French initiative)

* i.e. the talks to be initiated at Sir Samuel Hoare's visit to Paris a few days later.

not fixing the date of application until after peace talks had been held.⁽⁶⁹⁾

The Hoare/Laval peace plan, in fact, put all serious consideration of an oil sanction out of court until the New Year. Then, towards the end of January 1936, the League Council's Committee of 18 appointed a sub-committee of experts to conduct a technical examination of the transport and trade in oil with a view to submitting a report on the likely effectiveness of an embargo. The Cabinet had previously authorised Mr. Eden, now Foreign Secretary, to support this move.⁽⁷⁰⁾

As the time approached for the re-assembly of the Committee of 18, Mussolini exerted fresh pressure on M. Flandin—who had succeeded M. Laval on 24th January—to denounce the military parts of the Rome Agreement, and worst of all for France, by threats not to fulfil Italy's obligations under the Locarno Treaty. Mr. Eden and the British Ambassador in Rome for their part were inclined to think that Italy was now less likely to retaliate to fresh sanctions by fresh aggression, and ultimately the Cabinet—with the report of the League's committee of experts before them—came down in favour of imposing an oil embargo at as early a date as could be agreed. But Ministers were by no means of one mind when they came to consider the possible military consequences of such a move, and the Cabinet finally instructed the Foreign Secretary to avoid taking the lead in this matter at Geneva, if possible.⁽⁷¹⁾

Back at Geneva, Mr. Eden found a very apprehensive M. Flandin who seemed against oil sanctions and who, before making his final decision, wanted confirmation that Britain would fulfil her obligations under the Locarno Treaty even in the absence of the other guarantors. Flandin was also so anxious to make another attempt at a settlement that a rather unhelpful Eden felt compelled to acquiesce. But the latter's talks with representatives of other States convinced him that something must be said by the League about sanctions or else the world, and in particular Italy, would assume that the oil embargo had been dropped. In the circumstances he thought it unavoidable to ignore the Cabinet instructions; and therefore, at the meeting of the Committee of 18, after falling in with Flandin's proposal that there should be a League appeal for a settlement, Eden took the initiative by announcing Britain's support for an oil sanction, a move which Flandin thought lessened the chances of a settlement.⁽⁷²⁾ The appeal was duly made, on 3rd March, 'for the immediate opening of negotiations in the framework of the League of Nations and in the spirit of the Covenant, with a view to the prompt cessation of hostilities and the definite restoration of peace,' and replies were asked for by 10th March. In the meantime the need for sanctions disappeared. Abyssinia agreed to negotiate on

5th March, and Italy, in principle, on 8th March. On 7th March Hitler had revolutionised the international situation by a military reoccupation of the Rhineland.⁽⁷³⁾

Thereafter the Abyssinian dispute was relegated to the background. During various meetings of the Locarno Powers to discuss what to do in the new situation the Italian representatives maintained rigidly that their country would do nothing to fulfil its obligations as long as sanctions were in force. In these circumstances Flandin wanted sanctions to be withdrawn. Although Britain gave no encouragement to this suggested move, it must have been clear to Mussolini that he had little more to fear from the League particularly when, after these Locarno consultations, proposals were made for the creation of an international force, including detachments from Locarno Powers, to be stationed along the German frontier during an interim period pending negotiations with Germany, and for the reinforcement of the security of the Locarno Powers by undertakings of mutual assistance.⁽⁷⁴⁾ From now onwards the problem of sanctions, for Britain, was not one of extension but of curtailment and removal, and the issue of defence dispositions in the Mediterranean became not a matter of military security so much as one of public opinion.

The Rhineland crisis only pinpointed what had, all along, been the major reason for the reluctance of Great Britain and France to make any move which might entail military action against Italy. Quite apart from any sympathy with at any rate moderate ambitions on the part of Italy, both countries were primarily concerned, from the point of view of national defence, with the problem of Germany. Neither wished to embark on any military operation which would weaken its strength in face of Nazi ambition backed by the obviously increasing pace of German rearmament.

Shortly after the Rhineland crisis of March 1936 the Chiefs of Staff wrote an appreciation of the state of Britain's forces to face a war with Germany. The steps already taken to provide against the risks of war with Italy meant that, without mobilisation or withdrawal from the Mediterranean, Britain would be seriously exposed in the air, and open at sea to attacks by Germany. Moreover, she could not, in the event of such attack, send an army overseas. If there were mobilisation, but if existing forces in the Mediterranean had to be kept up to full strength, naval strength at home, though improved, would not be sufficient, and there would be little difference in the state of the Royal Air Force. On the other hand, it would then be possible to send a Field Force abroad. If a defensive strategy in the Mediterranean were adopted, abandoning any attempt to hold the central areas and resting content with holding only Gibraltar and Suez, then the Royal Navy would be able to make

the home base and the main trade routes reasonably secure 'provided that unrestricted submarine warfare was not adopted by Britain's enemies'. On the other hand, a defensive Mediterranean strategy would, of itself, do little to help the Army or the Air Force. Only if peace was guaranteed in the Mediterranean would the full requirements for a naval war against Germany be available. In such circumstances, also, the Field Force would be better equipped. On the other hand, and even with this proviso, air strength at home would be quite inadequate.⁽⁷⁵⁾

On the French side, willingness to pay Italy's price rather than to run risks *vis-à-vis* Germany, became more obvious the longer the war in Abyssinia went on. Indeed, it became explicit by mid-April 1936, when the League Council heard both Italy's terms for a suspension of hostilities and also a warning that Italian collaboration in Europe depended on a settlement of the Abyssinian question. On this occasion Paul Boncour, the French delegate, made clear both his country's desire for a settlement and also the reasons why:

'Passing divergencies must not prevent us from finding ourselves united again in face of the formidable eventualities that now weigh upon Europe as a result of certain events. . . . We need peace in Ethiopia in order to address ourselves to the dangers with which Europe is threatened. We need a settlement of the position of a great country *vis-à-vis* the League of Nations, in order that this country may take part in the work of European reconstruction; and I note with satisfaction that the representative of Italy has graciously drawn our attention, on this point, to the fact that this is also the desire of his own country.'⁽⁷⁶⁾

These words expressed, almost exactly, the views of H.M. Government as well.

From the British point of view, there was an additional consideration, but one which is not mentioned in order to imply in any way that Britain was more inclined to oppose Italy than was France. That was that H.M. Government were determined that in no circumstances would they act without assured French support. The nearer any proposed line of action threatened a military outcome the stronger that determination became. This point has already been illustrated from official sources, and is borne out by private Ministerial comment.⁽⁷⁷⁾ As early as 5th July 1935 there is an entry in Neville Chamberlain's diary in which he recounts talk with Baldwin, Hoare, Eden and others designed to find some way of bringing Franco-British pressure to bear, privately, on Mussolini. But, he goes on, 'if the French would not play, we have no individual (as opposed to collective) obligations and we should not attempt to take on our shoulders the whole burden of keeping the peace'.⁽⁷⁸⁾

Again, in a letter of 5th October, Chamberlain wrote in the same spirit that 'people are scared of another war in Europe but I believe we can keep clear of that for the French are determined not to fight and we are not going to act without them'.⁽⁷⁹⁾ There is no reason to suppose that Chamberlain's views were different from those of the large majority of his colleagues. Moreover, Ministers who thought in this way did not do so simply because of the advice of the Chiefs of Staff. But reluctance to act without the French should not be interpreted as willingness to go to war together with them.*

* What has been said here concerns Ministers and officials. So far as the British electorate was concerned, its strong support for the League was shown in the General Election of 4th November 1935 when all parties asserted their adherence to League principles. Foreign policy was the leading issue in that election and the one over which there was least difference between the parties.

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| (1) For accounts of the political aspects of the crisis, see The Earl of Avon, <i>op. cit.</i> , Bk. I, Chapters XI–XVI and Bk. II, Chapter I, and Middlemas and Barnes, <i>op. cit.</i> , Chapters 30 and 31 | 187 |
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| (3) Meeting of Ministers 21st August 1935. Filed with Cab. Cons. 42(35) | 188 |
| (4) For earlier discussions, see C.O.S. 147th and 166th Mtgs and C.O.S. 388 | 189 |
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| (6) C.O.S. 146th and 147th Mtgs.; C.O.S. 388. The C.I.D. Subcommittee on Trade Questions in Time of War, investigating the possibility of sanctions, (see Cab. Cons. 35(35)2) expressed the same view in C.P. 169(35) | 189 |
| (7) C.O.S. 392 | 189 |
| (8) The same assumption had already been made by the Chiefs of Staff, C.O.S. 388, Appendix I, p. 9 | 189 |
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| (10) C.O.S. 392, Annex, pp. 13–17 | 190 |
| (11) C.O.S. 392, paras. 13–16 | 191 |
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- (62) Templewood, *op. cit.*, p. 177. This passage comes from a section where Lord Templewood is describing events immediately before and after the General Election of 1935. 214
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- (65) The account of the military aspect of the Abyssinian crisis given by Lord Chatfield, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Chapter XII is, although brief, a very fair and accurate summary of the views of the Chiefs of Staff and the advice they gave to the Cabinet 215
- (66) C.O.S. 159th Mtg. and C.O.S. 419. See also C.O.S. 426 which covers all aspects of our Mediterranean and Middle East strategy. Cab. Cons. 56(35)3 and D.P.R. 16th Mtg. approved despatch of the brigade for international duties. 216
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- (75) C.O.S. 442, p. 14 221
- (76) R.I.I.A., *Survey*, 1935, Vol. II, p. 352 221

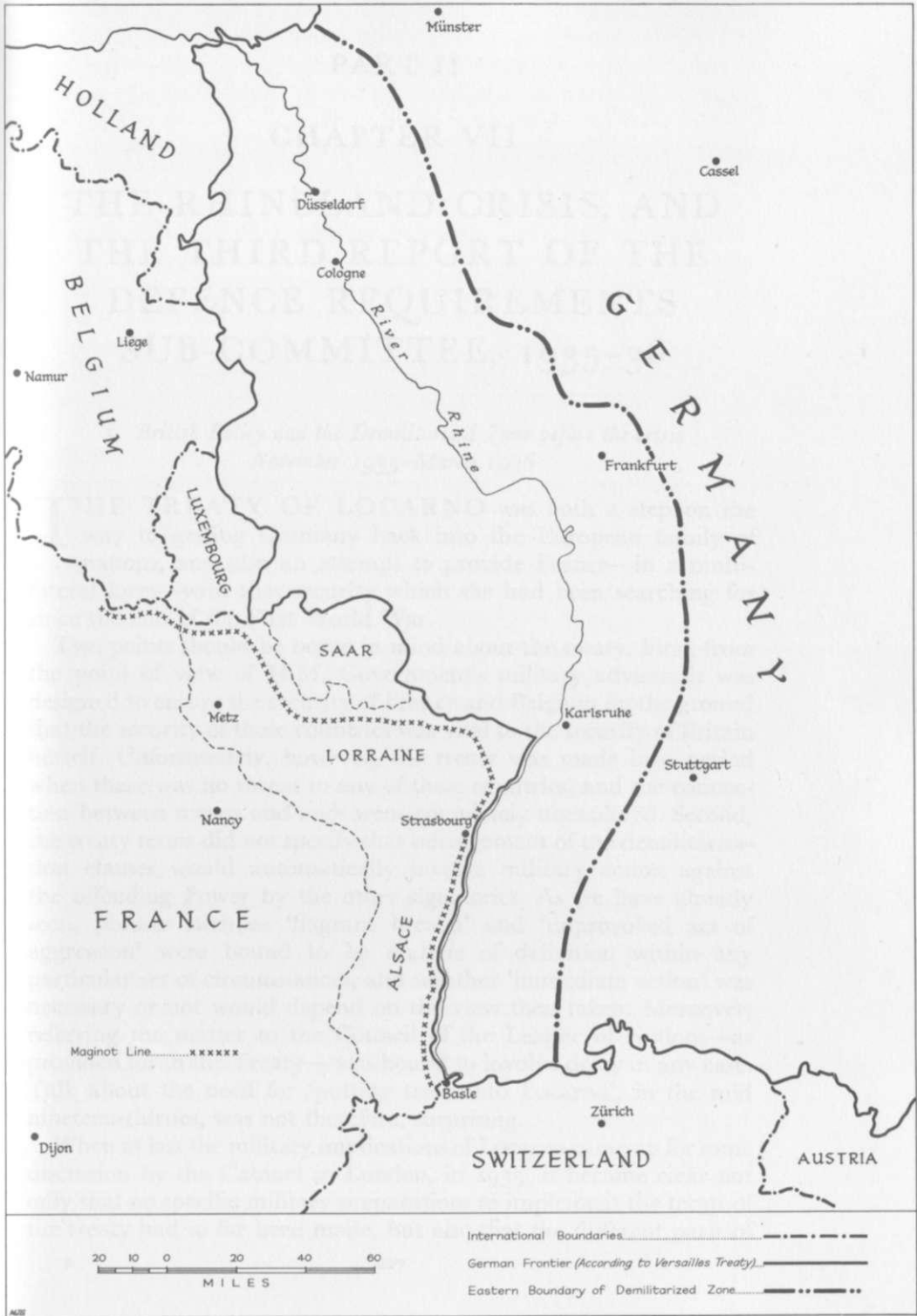
(77) See, for example, the Earl of Avon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 238, where the author points out that, in early July 1935, 'the Government concluded that everything depended on the attitude of France.' 221

(78) Neville Chamberlain's Diary; entry dated 5th July 1935 221

(79) Letter from Neville Chamberlain to his sisters, dated 5th October 1935; for an earlier expression of roughly the same view, see Middlemas and Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 839 222

Map 2

RHINELAND DEMILITARIZED ZONE 1936



PART II

CHAPTER VII

THE RHINELAND CRISIS, AND THE THIRD REPORT OF THE DEFENCE REQUIREMENTS SUB-COMMITTEE, 1935-36

1. *British Policy and the Demilitarised Zone before the crisis* *November 1935-March 1936*

THE TREATY OF LOCARNO was both a step on the way to getting Germany back into the European family of nations, and also an attempt to provide France—in a multi-lateral form—with that security which she had been searching for since the end of the First World War.

Two points should be borne in mind about the treaty. First, from the point of view of H.M. Government's military advisers it was designed to ensure the security of France and Belgium on the ground that the security of those countries was vital to the security of Britain herself. Unfortunately, however, the treaty was made in a period when there was no threat to any of these countries, and the connection between means and ends went completely unexplored. Second, the treaty terms did not specify that infringement of the demilitarisation clauses would automatically involve military action against the offending Power by the other signatories. As we have already seen, phrases such as 'flagrant breach' and 'unprovoked act of aggression' were bound to be matters of definition within any particular set of circumstances, and whether 'immediate action' was necessary or not would depend on the view then taken. Moreover, referring the matter to the Council of the League of Nations—as provided for in the Treaty—was bound to involve delay in any case. Talk about the need for 'putting teeth into Locarno', in the mid nineteen-thirties, was not therefore, surprising.

When at last the military implications of Locarno came up for some discussion by the Cabinet in London, in 1935, it became clear not only that no specific military preparations to implement the terms of the treaty had so far been made, but also that the different parts of

the treaty were not regarded with the same degree of seriousness. This applied particularly to the demilitarised zone. Early in 1935, in anticipation of the forthcoming talks with the French in London, the Foreign Secretary made, as we have seen, some suggestions whereby France might be reassured as to her security in return for a general deal with Germany. One of Sir John Simon's suggestions was that Britain should reaffirm that she

'still considered the demilitarisation of the Rhineland as a vital British interest and will treat it as such in accordance with the Treaty of Locarno.'⁽¹⁾

In discussing this the Cabinet—though without taking any specific advice from the Chiefs of Staff at this point—came to the conclusion that the maintenance of the demilitarised zone was not a vital British interest. If the French themselves raised the point at the talks in February the answer was to be simply that Britain regarded herself as bound by the Locarno Treaty and had no intention of repudiating it.⁽²⁾

The French were, in fact, already showing some anxiety about the future of the Rhineland. M. Laval mentioned his fears on this score to Sir John Simon when the latter visited Paris towards the end of February 1935, and remarked that 'he had heard from Belgian sources that Herr Hitler has made some very disquieting remarks to His Majesty's Ambassador at Berlin about the demilitarised zone'.⁽³⁾ To this Simon replied 'that His Majesty's Government was a signatory of the Treaty of Locarno, and the question of the demilitarised zone was not a matter for discussion'. Laval raised the same point when Eden visited him in Paris in March before the latter's visit with Simon to Berlin, although on this occasion there is no record of the British reply.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, although British Ministers had been asked by their allies to 'use very firm language' on this subject when visiting Hitler, the demilitarised zone does not, in fact, appear to have been discussed at Berlin.

This matter came to the Cabinet again in April 1935 as part of the preparations for the Stresa meeting. And, again, there was an implied warning for the future in what was decided. Any declaration at Stresa was to be made jointly with Italy, whose obligations under Locarno corresponded exactly with those of Britain. In addition, it was desirable that any such declaration should take the form of a general reaffirmation of loyalty to the binding nature of the whole treaty rather than picking out one set of obligations for special mention. Exact promises about hypothetical cases were to be avoided. And if the French persisted in demands for promises of a specific kind, then it should be pointed out to them that even French public

opinion would probably view differently, on the one hand, a minor infraction of the demilitarisation clauses such as a small fortification, as against, on the other hand, a major infraction such as the mobilisation and assembly of large military forces there.⁽⁶⁾

In fact, at Stresa the French Government produced detailed allegations of German infractions of the demilitarisation clauses. Much was going on, it was stated, under cover of para-military formations which the German Government could deny had any connection with the Reichswehr. Mussolini also expressed his anxiety. In the end the Stresa communiqué did contain a statement, but in the form the British Government had all along desired, namely a joint general declaration by Britain and Italy that they would perform their obligations under the Locarno Treaty as a whole.^{(6)*}

In London the Rhineland came up for discussion again during the summer of 1935 when the terms and implications of a possible Air Pact were being re-examined in some detail. Criticising this attempt to 'put teeth into Locarno' on the grounds that Locarno itself had broken down, one of the Government's professional advisers singled out the demilitarisation provisions for special mention. Time, he argued, had shown that the 'sanctions' provisions of Locarno hung precariously in the balance. At the moment there was evidence that Hitler was contemplating action in the Rhineland which would probably raise the problem of bringing these sanctions provisions into effect. And yet, he went on—

'It is almost certain that when matters come to this point none of the signatories of the Locarno Treaty will be prepared to take action. In this country the position would be particularly difficult if the French Government called on us to co-operate. Many people in the United Kingdom would say that Hitler was quite right. Still more would say that it was no affair of ours. Few would be ready to risk their own lives or those of their kith and kin, or to embroil the nation in a European war for this reason.'⁽⁷⁾

In supporting the suggestion of an Air Pact on the ground that it would contribute to the safety of a vital British interest, i.e. the maintenance of the integrity of Belgium and France, a Foreign Office memorandum commented also on the demilitarised zone in this connection:

'The proposed air convention does not apply to the demilitarised zone. Indeed, one of its merits may be that it emphasises how

* See also above, p. 154.

much more serious we consider an attack on France or Belgium than a disregard of the Locarno provisions about the demilitarised zone.'⁽⁸⁾

During the autumn of 1935 French fears about the Rhineland revived with the possibility that Germany might seek some way of turning the Abyssinian crisis to her own advantage. The French Government therefore asked Britain to reaffirm her loyalty to her Locarno obligations. But whatever the cause of French fears, British reassurances were not in any way specifically related to the demilitarised zone. Moreover, the Anglo-French staff conversations of the last quarter of 1935 were concerned only with possible aggression by Italy. In spite of rumours to the contrary, these conversations did not deal in any way with joint Anglo-French measures of a precautionary kind against possible German aggression.⁽⁹⁾

Early in 1936 the Foreign Secretary (now Mr. Eden) asked the C.I.D. to consider the value of the demilitarised zone from the points of view of the Army and the Royal Air Force.⁽¹⁰⁾ He made the request because it seemed to him from the steadily accumulating evidence of the last few years, and particularly of recent months, that the continuance of demilitarisation might be raised by Germany at any moment. Whether genuinely or not, the German Government had several times recently used the Franco-Soviet Pact, and the Anglo-French Staff talks held during the Abyssinian crisis, as reason to cast doubt on the continued validity of Locarno in general and of the Rhineland arrangements in particular. So much so that, shortly before Christmas 1935, the British Ambassador in Berlin reported:

'Locarno and the Demilitarised Zone

Herr Hitler's attitude and manner when referring to these questions made a very bad impression. He was patronising in regard to Locarno, and struck a cynical note of regret at having failed to occupy the zone on the 16th March last. It seems probable that he will proceed to that reoccupation whenever a favourable opportunity presents itself. This will hardly be, however, before he has made a final effort to "square" Great Britain.'⁽¹¹⁾

Mr. Eden therefore notified the C.I.D. that he would like to know:

- '(i) What defensive value the demilitarised zone is to France, Belgium and ourselves;
- (ii) What obstacle it constitutes to the defence of Germany against attack by the Western Powers.'

This request to the C.I.D. coincided with the first signs of a new

effort to reach a general settlement with Germany. The Foreign Secretary circulated to the Cabinet a long memorandum on 'the German Danger' in which he included confidential reports on the whole range of German ambitions and potentially offensive preparations. From this evidence he drew two conclusions. First, that Britain should hasten to complete her own rearmament to be ready for all eventualities. Second,

'that whilst pursuing our rearmament it will be well to consider whether it is still possible to come to some *modus vivendi*—to put it no higher—with Hitler's Germany, which would be both honourable and safe for this country, and which would, at the same time, lessen the increasing tension in Europe caused by the growth of Germany's strength and ambition.'⁽¹²⁾

Noting this memorandum, together with the Foreign Secretary's views about possible French and Belgian reactions to an approach to Germany, the Cabinet decided that the whole question of British policy towards Germany should be considered in detail as soon as the Foreign Secretary was ready to do so.⁽¹³⁾

In the meantime both the Air Ministry and the War Office presented their views on the demilitarised zone in answer to the Foreign Secretary's earlier request to the C.I.D. The Air Staff argued that, from their point of view, the zone was of negligible value as a barrier between Germany on the one hand, and Great Britain, France and Belgium on the other, in the event of aggression by Germany from the air. With the speed and range of modern aircraft the limited depth of the zone represented no more than a few minutes flying time; it was not necessary, therefore, for Germany to establish airfields there in order to carry out air attacks on France, Belgium and Great Britain. Further, even if airfields in the zone had been necessary for such attacks, the fact was that Germany could easily construct them there if she wished and indeed she had already done so. For these reasons, the Air Staff concluded—

'the maintenance of the demilitarised zone, in so far as it may prove possible to maintain it in face of clandestine preparation by Germany, is a matter of negligible defensive value from the air point of view to France, Belgium or Great Britain.'

From the point of view of the defence of Germany, also, the Air Staff considered the maintenance of demilitarisation of little importance. Even supposing there were no clandestine preparations at present going on, Germany could move her anti-aircraft and aircraft defences into the zone, on the outbreak of war, 'just as quickly as the Allied air forces could reach their war stations'. The only

advantage, from an air point of view, to be gained from continued demilitarisation, was an indirect one.

'If the existence of the zone makes land defence of the German frontier more difficult, then it may prove, in the event, that defence against an Allied invasion will absorb a greater number of German aircraft for direct co-operation with the landward defence than would be required if permanent defence works had been established within the zone itself. In that case the German air offensive against the Allies would be proportionately reduced by the additional number of aircraft so allotted to assist in the direct defence of the frontier. The total effectiveness of the German air offensive would thereby be reduced. This in turn would react unfavourably upon the air defence of Germany as a whole.'⁽¹⁴⁾

The General Staff saw much more to be gained from continued demilitarisation. The defensive value of the zone, from the point of view of France, was that it denied to Germany the protection of a fortified frontier behind which to mobilise and concentrate. More troops would therefore be required for frontier defence in the absence of fortified positions. This would apply particularly to the Palatinate and to the Ruhr. Further:—

'Germany would have to concentrate further back from an undefended than from a defended frontier, possibly east of the Rhine; this would not be such a serious disadvantage for mechanised forces as for others; but in both cases it would make it more difficult for the Germans to surprise the French before they had had time to man their fortifications at war strength.'

The same considerations applied to Belgium as to France. And to Britain the demilitarised zone was of advantage because of the additional security it provided, on the grounds described above, to France, Belgium and Holland.

From the point of view of the defence of Germany the General Staff argued that it would be of advantage to Britain, France and Belgium to keep the Rhineland demilitarised.

'If Germany wishes to stand on the defensive on her western frontier, the unilateral demilitarised zone is a weakness, since the Western Powers could mobilise and concentrate behind their frontier fortifications and attack, when ready, against a hastily prepared defence.'

This would be of value to the Allies whether they attacked north or south of Coblenz and, in each case, might compel the Germans

to concentrate east of the Rhine. Further, Germany would need more men to defend an unfortified frontier, and this might prove a serious handicap were she engaged simultaneously on her eastern and western frontiers. Finally, a point the Germans had themselves long noted:

'The new German army is organised on a territorial basis, men being allotted to mobilise in their own corps areas. Rhinelanders liable for service are being distributed to mobilise with units all over the rest of Germany. This entails obvious disadvantages and delay which would be avoided if the normal military organisations were established in the demilitarised zone.'⁽¹⁵⁾

During February 1936 the Cabinet further considered their future general policy towards Germany. Their discussions were now almost entirely on political issues, and neither Service Ministers nor the Chiefs of Staff were consulted in any further detail. For these discussions the Foreign Secretary, however, did prepare a memorandum on the demilitarised zone. Mr. Eden stated that the French were anxious about the zone, and also that they were anxious to know what Britain would do in case Germany infringed existing treaties. For the guidance of the Cabinet Mr. Eden made clear his own views.

'I would deprecate at the present moment any discussion with the French Government as regards the attitude which our two Governments should adopt in the hypothetical case of a violation of the Demilitarised Zone. The question is highly delicate and complicated in view of the variety of circumstances in which it might be raised in practice, and I would therefore much prefer not to have to commit myself now to any general statement regarding either policy or treaty interpretation. Moreover, as the Zone was constituted primarily to give security to France and Belgium, it is for those two Governments in the first instance to make up their minds as to what value they attach to, and what price they are prepared to pay for, its maintenance. . . .'

'M. Flandin's soundings show, I think, that the French Government are themselves uncertain as to what attitude they ought to adopt. They would probably like us to make up their minds for them, and then excuse themselves for not fighting for the Zone on the ground that we would not join them. Although it would be dangerous to be too categorical, it seems unlikely that any French Government would attack Germany merely in order to maintain the demilitarisation of the Rhineland. . . .'

The Foreign Secretary gave full weight to the views both of the Air Staff and of the General Staff in this connection. Moreover, he

stressed the fact that the demilitarised zone was of advantage to the stability of eastern Europe because, by making German defence more difficult and French attack easier, it enhanced the value of French pacts with east European countries. Despite these latter considerations however, he concluded:

‘... taking one thing with another, it seems undesirable to adopt an attitude where we would either have to fight for the Zone or abandon it in the face of a German reoccupation. It would be preferable for Great Britain and France to enter betimes into negotiations with the German Government for the surrender on conditions of our rights in the Zone while such surrender still has got a bargaining value.’⁽¹⁶⁾

On 5th March the Cabinet discussed these problems at some length. The Foreign Secretary pointed out that the French wanted some reassurance about British action if Germany violated the demilitarised zone before they, the French, would commit themselves to oil sanctions against Italy. Indeed the French had posed this hypothetical question in the, to Britain, awkward circumstances of Italy's withdrawing from her obligations under Locarno leaving Britain alone to support France. The Cabinet showed themselves most reluctant to consider the possibility of British action in any circumstances where one of the guarantors of Locarno had defaulted on its obligations; and much time was spent on the legal niceties of the situation which would be so created. There was also some discussion on what would constitute a ‘flagrant’ breach of Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles in the sense intended by Locarno. According to Article 2 of the latter treaty, the guarantor Powers were obliged to take automatic and individual action only if the assembly of German forces in the Rhineland constituted an ‘unprovoked act of aggression’ making immediate action necessary. The Cabinet took the view that nothing Germany had done so far in the Rhineland, for example the preparation of airfields, constituted such a breach. Nor would they consider the equipping of barracks and the placing of garrisons in them as a more serious offence. Only the assembly in the zone of armed forces obviously intended for actual invasion of France or Belgium would, in their view, constitute the type of breach described as ‘flagrant’. And there was reason to suppose that, even from the French point of view, the simple reoccupation of the Rhineland by German troops would constitute not a flagrant but only a qualified breach of Locarno.

As the meeting of 5th March went on it became increasingly clear that, in the view of the Cabinet as a whole, the reality of the situation was that neither France nor England was in a position to take

effective military action against Germany if the latter violated Locarno, and that the French should have their eyes opened to this. One way to get round this awkward situation was to open negotiations with Germany herself. By this means the problem of the Rhineland might be solved in a wider context, for example an Air Pact. At the end of the meeting the Foreign Secretary was instructed to discuss the future of the zone 'in realistic spirit' with the French. He was to make it clear to them that if one signatory repudiated its obligations under the Locarno Treaty the proper course for the other signatories was to confer together about future action in the changed conditions.⁽¹⁷⁾

Three days later German troops re-entered the Rhineland and Hitler denounced Locarno.

2. German Policy and the Demilitarised Zone May 1935-March 1936⁽¹⁸⁾

By the summer of 1935 Hitler had freed himself mostly by unilateral action, but also partly by agreement with Germany's erstwhile conquerors, from all the military restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles with the one exception of the demilitarised zone. And the reintroduction of conscription in March 1935 was bound to make Germany's western neighbours fear that demilitarisation of the zone was not likely to last much longer. Germany was to have an army of 12 corps and 36 divisions by the autumn of 1939, and already some 20 divisions were in existence. On 13th May 1935 it was decided to increase the total to 24 and also to begin the establishment of 3 armoured divisions.⁽¹⁹⁾ Moreover, during the same month considerable development took place in German military organisation, both professional and departmental.

In a long speech to the Reichstag on 21st May, however, Hitler attempted to set at rest some of the fears his recent moves had given rise to. He rejected the recent German resolution sponsored by the French on the familiar grounds that it was not Germany who had unilaterally infringed the Treaty of Versailles, but rather those Powers who had not followed the disarmament imposed on Germany, by their own disarmament as contemplated in the Treaty. Germany was, however, fully prepared to work together with other nations of Europe on grounds of complete equality. She would respect the remaining articles of the Treaty of Versailles, including those on territorial arrangements, and would carry out only by friendly agreement such revisions as would become inevitable in the course of time. Further she would observe every treaty signed voluntarily, whether signed before or after the present Government came to

power. In particular, she would observe the Locarno Treaty as long as the other signatories did the same. But, Hitler added, the continued increase of troops on the other side of the Rhine frontier in no way made easier Germany's difficulties in carrying out this contribution to the peace of Europe.⁽²⁰⁾

Behind this facade, however, Hitler continued to make his preparations for a military reoccupation of the Rhineland, at an unspecified date, using the Franco-Soviet Treaty and the Anglo-French staff talks arising out of the Abyssinian crisis as excuses. By the terms of the former, France and Russia agreed to consult each other under the terms of Article 10 of the League Covenant in the event of a threat of aggression against either of them by a European state. In the event of actual unprovoked aggression against either of them by a European state immediate mutual assistance would have to be given. The Pact was followed, a fortnight later, by a further treaty between Russia and Czechoslovakia modelled on the Franco-Soviet Pact, but which would come into force in the case of aggression only if France had already fulfilled her treaty obligations to the country so attacked.⁽²¹⁾

The German Government claimed that it regarded the Franco-Soviet Pact, from the first, as an alliance with an offensive purpose. 'Although it has been given the ostensible character of a general security pact, it is a one-sided Treaty of alliance with an offensive character directed against Germany'. So wrote a German Foreign Office legal expert early in May. And he went on. 'The Treaty means the death blow to the collective system and the end of the Locarno Pact. The ring around Germany has thus become tighter, if it has not yet been completely closed. The Russian point of view has in all essentials prevailed'.⁽²²⁾ Thus, although Hitler reaffirmed his loyalty to Locarno on 21st May, he did so on condition that other parties 'are on that side ready to stand by the pact'. And he referred to 'an element of legal insecurity, which had been introduced into Locarno by the Franco-Soviet agreement'.⁽²³⁾

The Abyssinian crisis, quite apart from the obvious opportunity it offered to Hitler to get on better terms with Mussolini, also provided a further ground for suspicion and attack against France. As we have already seen, Britain's desire to be reassured of French support in the event of hostilities in the Mediterranean gave France an opportunity to ask, as a *quid pro quo*, for reassurance of Britain's help should Germany disregard her obligations under Locarno. All along, this was the real concern of the French Government in trying to soft-pedal League action against Italy. When this process culminated in the autumn of 1935 in staff talks designed to deal solely with the risk of hostilities in the Mediterranean, it was not altogether surprising that the German Government claimed that talks for one purpose might be

extended to another. Indeed, if Russia were eventually brought in as well, Germany would be faced with a renewal of the Triple Entente. Therefore the Anglo-French staff talks were bitterly attacked in the German press towards the end of 1935 and again early in 1936.⁽²⁴⁾ On 1st January 1936 the French Ambassador in Berlin, suspecting that these attacks were intended to prepare the way for Germany's military reoccupation of the Rhineland, protested to Hitler. In answer he was told that the German Government had not intended to raise problems about Locarno. But a few days later he felt bound to complain again, warning the German Government that military action in the Rhineland would have serious consequences.⁽²⁵⁾

Meanwhile, two further developments were taking place. First, in early 1936 there were meetings between representatives of the German and Italian Governments. Hitler's main, or at any rate immediate, purpose in all this was to discover whether Mussolini was likely to stand by his obligations under Locarno, and, if necessary, to persuade him not to do so. The possibility that Mussolini would default was clearly made stronger now that oil sanctions were under discussion. And, in fact, on 25th January Mussolini published an article in the *Popolo d'Italia* in which he claimed that Anglo-French staff talks upset the equilibrium established by Locarno and might well have fatal consequences for that system. In mid-February Baron Aloisi, the Italian representative at Geneva, asked the German Ambassador in Rome what Germany would do about the Locarno Treaty if the Franco-Soviet Pact was ratified by the French Parliament. To this the answer was that nothing had yet been decided. But Aloisi was, in turn, asked whether Italy was herself likely to repudiate the Treaty. To which he replied that though the problem was not yet acute, it could become so if sanctions were extended.⁽²⁶⁾

Second, in mid-January 1936 the French Government began to take steps to bring the Franco-Soviet Pact before the French Parliament for ratification. On 27th February the Pact was ratified by a large majority of the Chamber of Deputies. On 4th March the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Senate agreed to the Pact in principle. For some time past Hitler had planned to make his move into the Rhineland coincide with ratification although, in his usual way, he took long to come to a definite decision. In any case he was bound to be doubtful both about Britain and Italy. There had already been feelers from Britain for a general agreement, but Hitler was uncertain how far they were meant to go. And it was only later that day he received an assurance from Mussolini that Italy would not observe her Locarno obligations should she be called upon to do so because of German reactions to the Franco-Soviet Pact.

On 5th March German missions accredited to the other Locarno Powers were given their instructions; at the same time that Hitler

was addressing the Reichstag on 7th March, announcing Germany's military reoccupation of the Rhineland zone, they were to deliver a memorandum setting forth the reasons why this action had been taken, and setting forth German proposals for the future.

Let us turn back at this point to examine briefly German military preparations for this move. At a German National Defence Council meeting on 26th June 1935 reference was made to Hitler's promise on 21st May to respect Locarno. General Jodl, then Chief of the National Defence Section, stated that only absolutely essential military preparations were to be undertaken in the zone. What was done was to be kept hidden as much as possible. These preparations were to deal with the police, transport and communications authorities in the event of mobilisation. Arrangements were to be made, for example, to clear the river itself of unnecessary traffic when the time came. Further, there was a General Staff plan to move ten divisions into the Rhineland should the French attack. Early in January 1936 the first proposals were worked out to convert three police brigades, stationed in the Rhineland, into military forces and to re-garrison the area. The Reich was in future to be divided, i.e. by the inclusion of the Rhineland, into twelve instead of ten Military Districts.⁽²⁷⁾

On 2nd March Field Marshal von Blomberg, Reich Defence Minister, issued the deployment order for the troops who were to advance into the Rhineland, and on the 5th he issued a further directive ordering the advance to take place on the 7th. Only 36,000 troops were to take part, and only a small proportion of them were to advance close to the French frontier. Aachen, Trier and Saarbrücken, for example, were to be garrisoned by only one battalion apiece. If endangered, these formations could easily be withdrawn. Enemy action was not anticipated, and resistance was to be offered only if the other Locarno Powers made a hostile move first. It is impossible to be sure what the German forces would have done in face of active resistance to their move; they might, for example, have retreated from the area on the left bank of the Rhine concentrating their resistance on the bridgeheads on the right bank.⁽²⁸⁾ On 13th March, a week after the reoccupation, the three German Service Attachés in London reported that the situation was still 'extraordinarily serious' and forecast 'very unfavourable developments' within the next few days; post-war evidence suggests, that although the receipt of this news caused von Blomberg to lose his nerve, von Neurath, von Fritsch and Beck received it more calmly. No ultimatum had been delivered by the other Locarno Powers. There was, therefore, no question of a general withdrawal from the Rhineland, although the evacuation of frontier towns may have been discussed. von Neurath appears to have been opposed even to that.⁽²⁹⁾

3. *The Reactions of the Powers to German Military Re-occupation of the Zone, March-April 1936*

The reaction of the British Government to Germany's action was what might have been expected from discussions on the subject before March 1936. On 8th March the Foreign Secretary wrote a long memorandum for the help of the Cabinet. He pointed out that, although there was everything to be objected to in Hitler's methods, nonetheless what he had done was what the British Government had been prepared ultimately, and was in process of bargaining, to concede. Despite the seriousness of the situation produced by Germany's unilateral action the important thing was to negotiate from the present position and to try to make the best of it, and in no circumstances to contemplate military action unless genuine aggression against France or Belgium was obviously intended. In this process there were two important questions to be asked. First, what sort of agreements could be negotiated with a Germany which could be trusted only within narrow limits. Second, how to stop the French from acting precipitately in the present and how to persuade them to enter upon some general agreement for European security, including Germany, in the future. Under the first head, and admitting all the doubts about any agreement concluded with Germany, Mr. Eden nonetheless concluded:

'... owing to Germany's material strength and power of mischief in Europe, it is our interest to conclude with her as far-reaching and enduring a settlement as possible whilst Herr Hitler is still in the mood to do so.'

He then went on to divide possible agreements with Germany into those 'safe and advantageous', those 'expedient but unimportant', and those positively 'dangerous'. Agreements he considered 'safe and advantageous'

'... would be those giving an immediate and more or less lasting relief from the present international tension, and the durability of which might be assumed by reason of the fact that Herr Hitler would not be making any concrete concessions or submitting to any inconvenient restrictions—in fact, agreements in which the spirit rather than the letter was the essential element. Perhaps the Air Pact and the non-aggression pacts and the return of Germany to the League might be placed in this category.'

'Dangerous agreements' Mr. Eden defined as those 'in which we agreed with Germany to mutual restrictions or to mutual concessions of a serious character'. Turning to France, the Foreign Secretary was categorical in his advice.

'We must discourage any military action by France against Germany. A possible course which might have its advocates would be for the Locarno signatories to call upon Germany to evacuate the Rhineland. It is difficult now to suppose that Herr Hitler could agree to such a demand, and it certainly should not be made unless the Powers, who make it, were prepared to enforce it by military action. Fortunately, M. Flandin has said that France will not act alone (i.e. under paragraph 3 of article 4 of Locarno), but will take the matter to the Council (i.e. under paragraph 2 of article 4 of Locarno). This he must be encouraged to do. But we must beware lest the French public, if further irritated or frightened, get restless at such a slow and indecisive action and demand retaliatory action of a military character such, for instance, as the reoccupation of the Saar. Such a development must be avoided if possible.'

Mr. Eden added that no finding by the Council, when appealed to, should be made the excuse for a French attack on Germany and a request for British assistance under article 4(2) of Locarno.

On the other hand, France would clearly want some satisfaction for her agreement voluntarily to tear up Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles. This would be difficult in the present state of French dissatisfaction and distrust. The best that Mr. Eden could suggest was that the League Council should give France, Britain, Belgium and Italy a mandate to carry on negotiations with Germany for a new Locarno, somewhat on the lines of Hitler's suggestion in his memorandum of 7th March.⁽³⁰⁾

Finally, Mr. Eden proposed that he should make the following statement in the House of Commons the next day:

'There is, I am thankful to say, no reason to suppose that the present German action implies a threat of hostilities; the German Government speak in their Memorandum of their "unchangeable longing for a real pacification of Europe", and express their willingness to conclude a non-aggression pact with France and Belgium. In case there should be any misunderstanding about our position as a signatory of the Locarno Treaty, His Majesty's Government think it necessary to say that, should there take place during the period which will be necessary for the consideration of that new situation to which I have referred, any actual attack upon France or Belgium which would constitute a violation of Article 2 of Locarno, His

Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, notwithstanding the German repudiation of the Treaty would regard themselves as in honour bound to come, in the manner provided in the Treaty, to the assistance of the country attacked.'⁽³¹⁾

At two meetings, on 9th and 11th March, the Cabinet approved in general the policy outlined by the Foreign Secretary.⁽³²⁾ In between the two meetings the Foreign Secretary and the Lord Privy Seal, Lord Halifax, had been to Paris to confer with representatives of the French, Belgian and Italian Governments. There they discovered an identity of French and Belgian views and also a desire for firm action. Both nations had been quite adamant that it was better to accept Germany's challenge now, or else worse would follow in a year or two's time and in even less favourable circumstances. They considered the risk of war with Germany, at present, remote. The French Government was not prepared to rule out negotiations with Germany, but negotiations must be preceded by withdrawal from the Rhineland. Moreover the British Ministers had been made aware that the policy of merely formally condemning German action and then trying to develop a constructive policy to re-establish the European situation, had at present little chance of acceptance by France or Belgium. It seemed likely that the French and Belgian Governments would ask the Council of the League to make a pronouncement and that then, if Germany was still obdurate, Britain would be asked to proceed to military measures. Italy, incidentally, had announced that she would honour no obligations while she was herself still exposed to sanctions.⁽³³⁾

Despite this forecast of difficulties the Cabinet held to their policy of conciliation. Ministers argued that Britain's military situation, with forces committed in the Mediterranean and with her rearmament programmes only just under way at home, left her in no position to engage in a European war. Moreover, they claimed that public opinion was strongly opposed to any military action against the Germans because of the demilitarised zone. Therefore the Foreign Secretary was empowered to see the German Ambassador in order to try to persuade Hitler to make some concession at this point so that France and Belgium could be appeased and the work of general settlement go on. What was clear beyond doubt was that the Cabinet had no intention of allowing Britain to be involved in any military action except in the very last resort.⁽³⁴⁾

In support of the Government two things should be noted. First, that in the House of Commons on 9th March both the Liberal leader and Mr. Dalton, for the Labour Party, took the same line. They welcomed the Foreign Secretary's statement which, while condemning Germany's methods, also assured the House that the Government

intended to take the opportunity offered by the crisis to bring about a new settlement of genuine collective security. The two Opposition spokesmen also deplored German methods, but showed some sympathy with her grievances. And the same line was taken the next day by Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Greenwood.⁽³⁵⁾ Second, the Chiefs of Staff supported the Government's doubts on military grounds. In an appreciation prepared at this time they pronounced a war with Germany 'a disaster for which the Services with their existing commitments in the Mediterranean are totally unprepared'.⁽³⁶⁾

In the meantime, what of the French? It appeared to the British Government that the French continued to consider military action until at any rate the second stage of talks between the Locarno Powers held in London between 12th and 19th March. This firm attitude had been foreshadowed by the French Foreign Minister, M. Flandin, just before the German reoccupation.⁽³⁷⁾ And, as we have seen, M. Flandin maintained the same line in Paris on 10th March. But French evidence suggests that this appearance of firmness was not entirely matched by what was going on behind the scenes.⁽³⁸⁾ From the start of the crisis French Ministerial opinion appears to have been divided about the best course of action, and it is far from clear that any military action by France was likely even before the London talks virtually ruled it out. At a meeting of French Ministers with Service Chiefs on the evening of 7th March it was decided to prepare for collective action with the Locarno Powers and the League of Nations, but not to rule out unilateral action in defence of legitimate French interests in accordance with Article 3 of Locarno. This decision was reaffirmed at a Cabinet Meeting the next day. Nevertheless, the War Minister, M. Maurin, and General Gamelin the Chief of Staff, both expressed a wish for general mobilisation in France as an act of elementary prudence against the risks of war. Maurin stressed that, in the circumstances, the Army's proper role was a defensive one and that it lacked preparations, still less readiness, for anything else. Flandin later claimed that he and his Cabinet colleagues were stupefied by the warning that general mobilisation would be needed for military action. At a Cabinet meeting on 10th March the military difficulties were again emphasised; and although Flandin claims that he himself was still in favour of action, the decision now went in favour of the waverers in the Government, and the question of military action against Germany was left in abeyance pending the talks between the Locarno Powers due to start in London on 12th March.

There were, at this stage, thirty French divisions available without complete mobilisation, excluding troops in fortified sectors and also elements of a general reserve. Of the thirty divisions, seven were

motorised infantry with five or more in process of motorisation; in addition there were three cavalry, two light tank and seven colonial divisions. These divisions, together with what was needed for A/A defence and for the Navy and Air Force involved about one million men, one fifth of the total needed for full mobilisation. But as a whole the Army was insufficiently equipped with, and in some cases (e.g. tanks and anti-tank weapons) totally deficient in modern weapons, and there were no preparations for industrial mobilisation.⁽³⁹⁾

There were French Army plans for the reoccupation of the Saar and the Rhineland, though without full mobilisation, in existence at the time of the crisis. But they were based on the assumption of a disarmed Germany; and when the French High Command had to review their plans in the light of German rearmament they thought mainly in terms of a static defence of the frontier together with fragmentary operations, opposition more of a symbolic nature than anything else. Gamelin's plan, signed by Maurin on 11th March, contemplated military action by France as a part of League, or at least Locarno combined operations. Even then it was limited in the extreme. The simplest and least risky action would be to reoccupy limited objectives in the Saar and also to occupy Luxembourg (with her consent) so as to form a front on the Moselle. To advance further into the Rhineland would demand full mobilisation both for the operation itself and in case Germany retaliated and war ensued.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In other words, neither in doctrine nor in force preparations were the French prepared for that immediate offensive response which could almost certainly have denied Germany the fruits of her initial surprise and that probably without a major conflict.⁽⁴¹⁾

Gamelin provides some evidence about this in his own autobiography.⁽⁴²⁾ He claims that at a meeting of Ministers on 7th March he said that if France acted on her own against Germany she would at first be superior, but that in the event of a long war Germany's greater manpower resources and industrial potential would probably prevail. He claimed further that, to attack, France must have adequate forces in case of a rebuff. Adequate forces did not involve mobilisation unless Germany resisted, but mobilisation would be necessary in face of resistance and so would allies. The other two Services also emphasised their need for full mobilisation. In all this Gamelin claims not to have been discouraging the politicians from taking action, but simply ensuring that they were fully aware of the military position. He had long seen the dilemma of France as either agreement with Germany (which, after Hitler's rise, was virtually impossible) or else stopping her before she became too strong. But, when it came to the point of action in 1936, he had to bear in mind both the late start of French rearmament and also the breakdown of those policies which had originally created Locarno and the Stresa front.

He suggests that Germany might have drawn back in face of pressure, but that he had also to guard against the alternative. And, despite his somewhat contradictory evidence to the Commission of Enquiry after the war, it seems that he demanded full mobilisation for any move which was likely to produce war between France and Germany.⁽⁴³⁾

In summing up their views on this subject after the war, the French Commission of Enquiry criticised the absence of any French plans for strong, rapid action in the event of German reoccupation of the Rhineland; the Commission also considered that the Service Staffs had failed to warn Ministers sufficiently of the extreme danger to French security of the stationing of German forces in the Rhineland. It was, moreover, highly critical of the state of the French Army and of the armaments industry at the time of the crisis. The French High Command had failed to produce new plans for reorganisation in accordance with technical advances, or any plans with new ideas, modern doctrines or original thought. In the years 1919-36 the French Army did not lack financial credits. But because of faulty organisation and planning there was under-spending to an extraordinary degree; allocations not used amounted in 1933 to 59 per cent, in 1934 to 30 per cent and in 1935 to 60 per cent. The Commission concluded that the French Army could have forced Hitler out of the Rhineland, despite the fact that even limited operations demanded some degree of mobilisation.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Against this background of British and French thinking, representatives of the Locarno Powers other than Germany met in London from 12th to 19th March to decide on future action. Flandin asked for an appeal to the League to approve a resolution condemning Germany's breach of Articles 42 and 43 of the Versailles Treaty and of Article 4 of Locarno. The Council should then be asked to adopt a resolution calling upon Germany to withdraw her troops from the zone while negotiations about its future status in a more general settlement were undertaken. He also asked for Staff conversations among the Powers so that, on any similar occasion in the future, automatic action would be possible. The British representative pointed out that Germany was unlikely to accept these terms and that, in that case, war might result, to which M. Flandin replied:

'that the French Government were not contemplating anything in the nature of a general advance into the Rhineland, the most they would do would be to seize one or two key positions (gages) which they would hold until Germany was induced to respond to the Council's invitation and negotiate,' and further . . . 'that the next challenge would not be an attack upon France or Belgium, but very likely an attack on Czechoslovakia or Austria.

If we failed to meet the present challenge, who could possibly say that Germany would be stopped in her next venture.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

M. van Zeeland of Belgium took a position mid-way between the French and British points of view. He

'maintained that the object at which you must aim was to find a resolution the terms of which would not be such as to humiliate Hitler, but which would at the same time vindicate international law. He wished to make it plain that it was not his view that if we asked too much of Hitler there was not a risk of war; on the contrary . . . the man was of the type who if driven to extremes might deliberately resort to war. His object was, therefore to avoid driving Germany to extremes. The problem was to find a resolution which would satisfy this need.'⁽⁴⁶⁾

Negotiations proceeded along these lines, originally divergent but gradually getting closer, for a week. Whether at Geneva or in London the only mention of military action of any significance was a suggestion that, on the model of what had earlier been done during the Saar plebiscite, a force of British troops might be stationed, as part of an international formation, in the demilitarised zone between French and German troops. The Chiefs of Staff comment on this was far from enthusiastic. They pointed out that, to the extent that British troops were sent to the Rhineland, so would Britain's ability to reinforce the Empire be reduced at a time when her most efficient forces were, anyway, committed to the Mediterranean.⁽⁴⁷⁾

On 19th March the negotiations in London resulted in an agreed set of proposals. Germany's action in the Rhineland was condemned. She was asked to submit her case to the Permanent Court of International Justice and, meanwhile, to take no further military steps in the Rhineland zone. An international force was then to be established in the zone while negotiations went on between all the Powers concerned about the future of the zone in particular and also about a general European settlement. And, finally, the Powers in London, i.e. France, Belgium, Britain and Italy, declared:

'that nothing that has happened before or since the said breach of the Treaty of Locarno can be considered as having freed the Signatories of that Treaty from any of their obligations or guarantees and that the latter subsist in their entirety . . .' and went on to undertake 'forthwith to instruct their General Staffs to enter into contact with a view to arranging the technical conditions in which the obligations which are binding upon them should be carried out in case of unprovoked aggression.'⁽⁴⁸⁾

Within a week the German Government had rejected these proposals outright, although at the same time promising a 'final and important document' in the near future designed to enable the nations of Europe to co-operate in settling their problems for all time.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Clearly by now, though in fact already by 19th March, the demilitarised zone had passed into the background and there was for the future, simply hope for a 'new Locarno',—whatever that might mean. On the other hand there still remained, as between the Western Powers, the promise of more active co-operation in the form of Staff talks which they had included in the statement of 19th March. The French Government had already pressed for these.⁽⁵⁰⁾

On 2nd April, therefore, the Foreign Secretary sent identical notes to the French and Belgian Ambassadors in London, reaffirming that, if the attempts at conciliation with Germany failed, His Majesty's Government would consult with the French and Belgian Governments about the steps to be taken to meet the new situation thus created and would take, in return for reciprocal assurances from France and Belgium, all practical measures to ensure the security of those two countries against unprovoked attack. For this purpose His Majesty's Government would 'establish or continue the contact between the General Staffs contemplated in the agreement of 19th March'. The Foreign Secretary made it clear that the despatch of these letters did not imply that the attempt at conciliation had yet entirely failed. Moreover, he authorised the opening of Staff talks on the understanding that these talks did not imply any political undertaking or any obligation regarding the organisation of national defence. The replies from the French and Belgian Governments accepted and confirmed the conditions which the Foreign Secretary had laid down.⁽⁵¹⁾

It is time to turn back and see what military advice the British Government was getting during the course of these political negotiations. On 12th March, and on their own initiative, the Chiefs of Staff asked the Joint Planning Staff to review the condition of Britain's forces, and to report on the existing position of defence forces at home and the possible improvements which would be achieved by mobilisation either with or without at the same time being relieved of their current responsibilities in the Mediterranean. Within a week the Joint Planners returned their report, which, together with the comments of the Chiefs of Staff, was immediately circulated to the Cabinet for information.*⁽⁵²⁾ The facts and figures provided by the Joint Planners were arranged under four possible situations—

* The general gist of this report has already been commented on above, pp. 220-21.

Table 1

Estimate of Forces available for the three Armed Forces, March 1936

- (i) British forces available for immediate war against Germany; i.e. without mobilisation or any change in the Mediterranean.
- (ii) Forces available with mobilisation, but no Mediterranean withdrawals.
- (iii) Forces available (i.e. for a war against Germany) combined with a defensive in the Mediterranean.
- (iv) Forces available against Germany with both mobilisation and peace in the Mediterranean.

(i) *Available for immediate war with Germany*

Royal Navy: 1 6-in. cruiser
 17 destroyers (only four modern)
 9 submarines
 + 5 destroyers } in 1 week
 1 submarine }
 + 1 battle cruiser } Withdrawals without
 1 6-in. cruiser } jeopardising the position in
 1 Flying-boat } the Mediterranean
 squadron }

Army: without mobilisation no military formations for overseas were available at all.

R.A.F.: This was a bad moment, because of reorganisation in accordance with the expansion programmes as well as because of the Mediterranean. Within three weeks, and without Mediterranean withdrawals there would be available:

6 fighter squadrons
 (2 obsolete and 2 inoperable at night)
 7 bomber squadrons
 1 Flying-boat squadron (obsolete)
 2 Army Co-operation squadrons

+ 100 per cent reserves

A.D.G.B.: the fighter squadrons listed above were only 33 per cent of that part of A.D.G.B. considered essential for the London area alone.

Lights were at the same percentage. The outer artillery zone was incomplete; the inner zone prejudiced by shortage of lights and ammunition.

Conclusions: For war with Germany with our present dispositions we were 'perilously exposed' in the air and 'completely open' to

attack by sea. Air Forces in general were considered 'utterly inadequate' for war with Germany at her present strength.

(ii) *Available on mobilisation but with no Mediterranean withdrawals*

| | | |
|---|---|------------|
| <p><i>Royal Navy:</i> 3 battleships 1 A/C carrier 2 7·5-in. cruisers 8 6-in. cruisers 15 destroyers</p> | } | in 14 days |
| <p>1 battleship in 28 days. Then nothing more till 42 days later.</p> | | |

Army: A Field Force of Corps H.Q. and some corps troops and two divisions in 3 weeks: but they would be without air defence brigade or tank units.

R.A.F.: The total possible addition to our first line air strength at home would be:
1 fighter squadron (obsolete)
2 light bomber squadrons

| | | |
|---|---|-----------|
| <p><i>A.D.G.B.:</i> Coast Defence</p> | } | No change |
|---|---|-----------|

Conclusions: In these circumstances the Navy would still be inadequate for war against Germany in respect of trade protection and security of the United Kingdom: it would also be inadequate for the escort of the Field Force. There would be little improvement in the air situation, but, given the escort, we at least had a Field Force of a kind to send.

(iii) *Available with mobilisation on the adoption of the defensive in the Mediterranean*

Royal Navy: At the risk of losing Malta and of prolonging the war with Italy, but not of sacrificing ultimate victory, the Royal Navy could provide a force adequate for reasonable security against Germany provided submarine warfare remained restricted. If unrestricted, reinforcement could be made only at the price of unreadiness for war with Italy. The improvement in seaward defences at home would be sufficient for the 4 most important naval ports.

Otherwise there would be no significant change since Army/Air Force dispositions in the Mediterranean were already on a defensive basis.

(iv) *Available on mobilisation and with peace assured in the Mediterranean*

Royal Navy: The Navy would have its complete requirements for war against Germany.

Army: The Field Force would be limited to two divisions for some months because of equipment and maintenance problems: but there would be tank and A/A units after two months.

R.A.F.: Not much improvement for 3-4 months. Even then the R.A.F. would still be 'quite inadequate' for security against air attack or for an air offensive against Germany.

Commenting on these estimates, the Chiefs of Staff ended with their own warning.

'Therefore, if there is the smallest danger of being drawn into commitments which might lead to war with Germany, we ought at once to disengage ourselves from our present responsibilities in the Mediterranean, which have exhausted practically the whole of our meagre forces. Even then, a considerable period of time must elapse, varying from two to four months as regards the Army and the Air Force, before these forces will be re-established at home.'⁽⁵³⁾

Towards the end of the month the Chiefs of Staff returned to the same theme. On 31st March they discussed in general, and on their own initiative, the implications of Staff talks with France and Belgium. They considered that such talks were likely to be of little practical value until it was known for certain whether or not there would, later on, be discussions with Germany also. If there were to be talks later, then no one was going to disclose detailed plans now, since no one could yet possibly know the circumstances of later talks and who would be supporting or aligned against whom. And they repeated their earlier warning that, before any talks with France and Belgium took place which might commit Britain to war, it was essential to wind up the situation in the Mediterranean and relieve the Services of their responsibilities there.⁽⁵⁴⁾

On 3rd April the C.I.D. discussed and settled, for the British representatives, the limits within which the forthcoming Staff conversations should take place. In the first place the conversations were to be confined within the limits set forth in the statement of 19th March; in other words they must be limited to Britain's existing obligations under the Locarno Treaty to come to the assistance of France and Belgium in the event of an unprovoked act of aggression by reason of the crossing of the frontier.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Second, the conversations

at present contemplated were not those envisaged in the Foreign Secretary's note of 2nd April.* He had then spoken of establishing or continuing contacts between the Staffs if the effort at conciliation with Germany failed. 'In the opinion of His Majesty's Government the effect of conciliation had not failed, and the undertaking is therefore not operative.' Third, the Staff representatives were to be empowered to discuss technical matters only. There was thus no question either of political undertaking or of any promise about the future size and organisation of Britain's armed forces. Finally 'the representatives of the Staffs must bear in mind and make clear in the course of the conversations that His Majesty's Government reserve full liberty to decide what form their assistance should take, and that they themselves have no authority to undertake any naval, military or air commitment.'⁽⁵⁶⁾

The Staff talks were held in London from 15th to 17th April. At the start the French and Belgian representatives expressed satisfaction with the scope of the talks as defined by the C.I.D. and explained to them by the senior British representative. The naval conversations were limited to an exchange of information about ports and about the state of forces actually in commission, together with certain information about communications, liaison officers and signal codes. The army conversations were limited to a statement of the British forces available, and a request to the French for information about facilities at ports, transport from ports to assembly areas, and assembly areas themselves. Air protection for ports and assembly areas was also discussed. The air conversations were complicated by the fact that the French produced a 'plan of work' which covered far more ground than the British representatives were authorised to explore. Some of the points raised, such as the strengths of the respective forces and the availability of aerodromes, were discussed in detail, and some other technical details were remitted for examination by the Service Attachés. In general, the French and Belgian representatives expressed satisfaction with what had been done, partly, at any rate, because these talks had laid the ground-work for more extended conversations should they become necessary.⁽⁵⁷⁾

On this quiet note the crisis virtually ended. But a little later the Chiefs of Staff prepared an appreciation of the situation in the event of German aggression in the immediate future. Their starting point in estimating comparative strengths was that peace was guaranteed in the Mediterranean and that there was no likely ally for Germany. Against her might well be ranged Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and Czechoslovakia, and perhaps Holland, Italy and Poland. Economically, German plans for independence were far from

* See above, p. 246.

complete, and she would suffer from shortages in two or three months after the outbreak of war.⁽⁵⁸⁾

They made a comparison of forces between the three leading Powers as follows:

Table 2

Comparison of Naval, Army and Air Forces of Britain, France and Germany, April 1936

| <i>Navies</i> | G.B. in Home Waters and Mediterranean | France, Home and Mediterranean | Germany |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Capital ships | 10 | 9 (3 very old, 6 old) | 6 (3 old) |
| A/C carriers | 3 | — | — |
| Cruisers 8-in. | 7 | 7 | — |
| „ others | 22 (8 modern) | 33 | 6 (all modern) |
| Destroyers | 10 (flotillas) | 49 | 12 |
| Submarines | 19 | 74 | 20 |

| G.B. <i>Armies</i> Field Force | France | Belgium | Germany |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|
| 1 Corps= | 5 mob. divs | 3 mob. divs | 3 Armoured divs |
| 2 divs and Corps troops | 48 Inf. divs 3 fortress divs 20 in reserve | 6 Inf. divs 6 Inf. divs in 1 week 6 more Inf. divs in reserve | 29 Inf. divs Not fully equipped and doubtful if industry could sustain expansion. Training not advanced: shortage of officers and N.C.O.s. |

| <i>Air Forces</i> | G.B. and France | Germany |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Bomber aircraft | 306 | 405 |
| Fighter aircraft | 469 | 144 |

A review of the possible sources of action open to Germany led the Chiefs of Staff to the conclusion that, on land and sea, she had not the necessary forces for a major offensive. The most effective course open to Germany, therefore, would be to attack Britain's food supplies. In the existing state of her defences this could face Britain

with a serious situation. There was no prospect of complete German success, however, since the Allied air offensive and the advancing French Army would not allow the concentration of her entire air effort against Britain. Nevertheless, there would be the paradoxical situation of Britain, by honouring her obligations to France and Belgium, presenting to Germany an objective far more vulnerable to air attack than any in either of the other allied countries. It was essential, therefore, for Britain in her present state of weakness to ensure that any allied plan contained, as a major consideration, measures designed to provide for her safety if air attacks were to be concentrated against her. Britain's main contribution to such a war would be economic pressure by sea-power. Her second effort would be the despatch of light bombers to the Continent so as to divert as much as possible from the German offensive by making the allied counter-offensive as strong as possible. In such a case Britain's land commitments could be limited to the administrative services for this air force, unless political considerations demanded the despatch of a Field Force as well.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Only a few days after approving this report, the Chiefs of Staff agreed that no attack by Germany on France was likely in the immediate future.⁽⁶⁰⁾ And with this, it seems, talk about the demilitarised zone passed into the background. A new phase in negotiations for a general settlement was to open during the summer of 1936, with the suggestion of a Five Power Conference of all the ex-Locarno Powers.

At this point the Chiefs of Staff summed up, from their point of view, the lessons of the Rhineland crisis. It had clearly brought out the dangers of collective security, and also the fact that for several years foreign policy and defence policy had gone hand in hand. Now Britain was in a position where, without warning, she might suddenly be plunged into war with inadequate and improperly disposed forces to meet the occasion. It was quite impossible to prepare and organise for war against any and every nation; and immediately a 'collective crisis' arose Britain became the most vulnerable of all nations owing to her world-wide territories and long communications. And, broadly speaking, these were the views which the Chiefs of Staff and many Ministers had expressed on the subject of Britain's part in collective security measures since the early nineteen-twenties.

The Rhineland crisis is sometimes described as the last occasion when the victors of 1918 could have brought Hitler's ambitions under control without the risk of a major war. Whatever the general validity of this proposition, it is, from the limited point of view of British policy, to some degree irrelevant. The fact is that the British Government, for a long time before the crisis, had determined for political reasons not to fight for continued demilitarisation but, rather, to bring it to an end by a process of negotiation. Despite some military

advice to the contrary, the Cabinet neither regarded the demilitarised Rhineland as an issue of vital strategic interest to Britain nor did they at this time look upon Hitler as a menace who would inevitably have to be dealt with sooner or later. It was the method, not the objective which they criticised in March 1936. During the crisis there was never a point at which Ministers in London engaged in a soul searching debate about the need for putting the clock back and what, in a variety of circumstances, it might cost to do so. Referring to the Paris talks of 9th to 11th March, when M. Flandin and M. Van Zeeland were most insistent in their demand for sanctions, Mr. Eden was quite emphatic that 'we could not join with the French in military action.'⁽⁶¹⁾ In the opinion of British Ministers the occasion did not justify war and they were convinced that the British public would not stand for it. In addition, they argued that Britain was not ready for war against Germany anyway, and that remained their view whether the crisis in the Mediterranean was brought to a quick conclusion or not.

What is more relevant to our purposes is whether the security of France and Belgium was still, and despite the Rhineland, considered of such strategic importance to Britain that preparations would be made to defend it should another crisis occur and positive aggression by Germany be threatened or actually take place. In a long speech in the House of Commons Mr. Eden argued that the integrity of the Low Countries always had been and still was of vital interest to Britain; in that sense 'there was nothing very new in Locarno'. Moreover, and despite the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, that interest would be defended and promises concerning it honoured.⁽⁶²⁾ Hence the Staff talks which were designed 'to compensate for the loss of security suffered by France and Belgium . . . owing to the violation of the demilitarised zone'. These talks went on, it should be remembered, while hope yet remained of a wide political settlement which might lessen the fear of future crises; to that extent they were bound to be limited in scope and, as we have seen, the French and Belgian Governments accepted this explicitly.*

Nonetheless, the very cautious attitude adopted by the British Government in the Staff talks in London during April, the fact that these talks were not followed up despite the failure to achieve the general political settlement which might have made them unnecessary, and the views of the Chiefs of Staff about Britain's part in a war in which she might be called on to join France and Belgium in fighting Germany, all suggest that even if a 'continental' strategic interest was being reaffirmed, the means to protect it were at the same time being denied. Purely from Britain's point of view, and

* See above, p. 246.

despite the brave words and intentions of Mr. Eden, the Rhineland crisis was a long step in the approach to that policy of political and military 'limited liability' which reached its peak in 1938. In a letter to his sisters, dated 28th March 1936, Neville Chamberlain wrote, 'I believe the Staff conversations will help him (Hitler) to realise that we mean business'. It is true that the German Government disliked and opposed the talks. Had they known what they amounted to, however, it is doubtful whether they would have regarded them as 'business'. Indeed, Mr. Eden assured Herr Ribbentrop that 'it was not a question of the military value of such conversations. What we are trying to do . . . is to find some means of reassuring opinion in France and Belgium. . . .'⁽⁶³⁾ It is difficult to avoid the impression that Staff talks were agreed to by Britain only on the assumption that they would not be of practical military importance. If the crisis had failed to disrupt common action—what Eden calls the 'alliance'—between Britain and France, it had certainly done nothing to strengthen it. In London, suspicion of possible 'commitments' to France was as strong as fear of Germany's ambitions. And if that is too harsh a judgment it is not unfair to argue that insularity still predisposed British negotiators to assume that common action with France could be planned largely on Britain's own terms.

4. *The Third Report of the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, November 1935-March 1936*

While events both in Abyssinia and in Europe were working towards the crises of late 1935 and early 1936, the D.R.C. were pursuing their enquiries into the changing needs of Britain's defence preparations within the terms of reference defined by the Cabinet at the end of July 1935.*

The Third Report of the D.R.C. was presented to the Cabinet on 21st November 1935.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The Committee, it should be remembered was, as before, an Official Committee consisting of the three Chiefs of Staff and the Permanent Heads of the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office. The chairman of the Committee was Sir Maurice Hankey. The Report was then passed, for further consideration, to the D.P.R.C., a Ministerial Committee presided over by the Prime Minister. The latter Committee completed its own report in mid-February 1936.⁽⁶⁵⁾ The Cabinet took these reports at the end of February, in the main approving the recommendations of its Ministerial Committee.⁽⁶⁶⁾ An outline of the programme

* See above, p. 180.

approved was presented to Parliament, as the Statement Relating to Defence, early in March 1936.⁽⁶⁷⁾

In their report the Committee of officials, i.e. the D.R.C., emphasised the radically different nature of their current enquiry from that which they had undertaken at the end of 1933. Their earlier investigations had been designed to disclose and provide for the 'worst deficiencies' in the existing programmes of the three Defence Services. Their present terms of reference, however, required them to work out

'programmes on the assumption that by the end of the financial year 1938-39 each Service should have advanced its state of readiness to the widest necessary extent in relation to the military needs of National defence and within the limits of practicability.'⁽⁶⁸⁾

So great a change in so short a space of time implied not merely serious developments in the international situation and an urgency to complete programmes unhampered by traditional methods, especially of finance, but also an openness of mind which would avoid trying to see in this, or in any future programme, the final statement of national security needs.

'... the subject of Defence Requirements is not one which, after decisions have been reached, can be dismissed for any long period as a matter which has been finished and done with. New events will occur, which in the majority of cases, are likely to increase, rather than to reduce, our commitments and risks. There can therefore, be no finality in this or in any later review of Defence Requirements.'⁽⁶⁹⁾

Certain disturbing features in the international scene, which had already been noted in the earlier report at the end of 1933, had changed but only for the worse. Germany was still rearming at full speed, and now rejoicing at the dissolution of the Stresa front. Japan showed no lessening of her intention to dominate the Far East just as Germany plainly intended to dominate Europe. If there was a need for, and indeed perhaps some slight hope of accommodation with both Powers, recent events had done little but emphasise the difficulties of friendship with either.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Unfortunately, while bad features had simply grown worse, there had now been disclosed complications not fully understood and, in one case, not even expected two years before. The Italo-Abyssinian dispute, especially when taken in conjunction with the earlier Manchurian episode, had brought to the front a difficulty which, though not wholly unforeseen, had hitherto not been taken into account in calculating defence requirements, namely the extent of Britain's possible commitments as a world Power within the system of collective security

provided by the Covenant of the League of Nations. The special danger of these commitments was the suddenness of the emergencies to which they were liable to give rise.⁽⁷¹⁾

Finally, and, in its immediate setting perhaps worst of all, the Italo-Abyssinian dispute had not merely destroyed the Stresa front and thus seriously weakened the ranks of those nations able to set some limit to the soaring ambitions of Germany, it had also revealed Italy as a possible enemy and one against whom no defence precautions had previously been taken. We have already seen how, in November 1933, the Cabinet, on the recommendation of the C.I.D., decided that 'no expenditure should for the present be incurred on measures of defence required to provide exclusively against attack by the United States, France or Italy.' That decision had still been operative when the D.R.C. was given its new terms of reference in the summer of 1935.⁽⁷²⁾ Yet, within a few weeks of that date the British Government were compelled to improvise military precautions on an extended scale to meet the very contingency of an attack by Italy which had hitherto been excluded from their calculations.

This worsening of the international scene led the D.R.C. to certain conclusions about the current relationship between foreign policy and defence. In the first place, the danger to Britain's national and imperial security involved in a fully armed and militarist Germany provided overwhelming reasons for avoiding any further estrangement either of Japan, or of any Mediterranean Power lying athwart the main line of communication to the East. In other words, wrote the Committee, it should be considered

'... a cardinal requirement of our national and imperial security that our foreign policy should be so conducted as to avoid the possible development of a situation in which we might be confronted simultaneously with the hostility, open or veiled, of Japan in the Far East, Germany in the West, and any Power on the main line of communication between the two.'⁽⁷³⁾

The danger to Britain of attempting to fight a war on three fronts was one to which the Chiefs of Staff repeatedly drew attention until the outbreak of war. It became, in their opinion, the chief danger against which it was the responsibility of the Foreign Office to provide. In the present circumstances, and to be more specific, the D.R.C. report went on:

'So far as Japan is concerned, in our previous Report we emphasised strongly the importance of an ultimate policy of accommodation and neighbourliness with that country. Recent events accentuate the desirability of that policy, difficult though it may be to carry out.'

So far as Italy was concerned, the Committee took the view that she might well need a period of recuperation after the Abyssinian war; and in any case, the problem of Italy's future political re-orientation must remain a matter of conjecture. But behind that uncertainty lay the ominous fact that Britain's present defence requirements were so serious that it would, in fact, be materially impossible, during the three year period with which the report mainly dealt, to make additional provision for the case of a hostile Italy. The Committee were therefore forced to the conclusion, clearly from necessity as well as from choice, that

'... for the moment at any rate, it is neither urgently necessary nor feasible to make provision for the contingency of a permanently hostile Italy, especially if... an appropriate policy can be pursued in the international field in order to counter this.'⁽⁷⁴⁾

Although not stating it categorically, the report leaves the clear impression that, in the Committee's view, accommodation would in the long run be least likely with Germany, and that better relations with the other two Powers could be, even if only slightly, more hopefully pursued.

The danger of such a serious combination of enemies raised the equally vital problem of allies. We have seen how, during the negotiations which led to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the Chiefs of Staff had emphasised the necessity of having France as an ally should Britain be engaged in war simultaneously against Germany and Japan.* And in the Mediterranean and Rhineland crises Britain and France, each from its own point of view, had demonstrated the importance it attached to the military support of the other even when the enemy looked like being only Italy or Germany rather than a combination of both. The two crises had indeed high-lighted the fact that France was almost the only country on which Britain could depend as an ally in any of the likely dangers looming ahead. Germany's sphere of influence was growing, not waning; Japan and Italy were both possible enemies and, at the best, very doubtful friends; the United States was considered to be more isolationist at heart than ever before.⁽⁷⁵⁾ In these circumstances, therefore, the D.R.C. emphasised that

'from the point of view of Imperial Defence, we would urge that, before Italy can again become a formidable factor, our long-range policy should be so aligned that we can never get into a position where we would not have a certainty of French

* See above, Chapter V, Section 3.

military support in the event of war with Japan and Italy at the same time, and *a fortiori* if we were involved simultaneously with Germany and Japan.'⁽⁷⁶⁾

All this led to the obvious conclusion that, whatever else H.M. Government did to forward their main policy of preserving peace, there was no practical alternative to raising Britain's armaments to a far more effective standard than that which would be achieved by the completion of the existing approved programmes. The necessity was not merely for strong defence forces, but also for forces ready to meet sudden emergencies such as those which had already occurred and which were not likely to be the last.

The Committee of Ministers to whom this report was forwarded, the D.P.R.C., endorsed in general the analysis of the current international situation given by their senior officials, and particularly emphasised the conclusion that a strong Britain was necessary if there was to be any happy outcome from international developments in the future. It had now become obvious, Ministers argued, that a strong Britain was essential if the success of the League system was still the aim. And if collective security failed, and Britain was forced back upon a more limited system of alliances then, equally, co-operation and aid could be expected from other nations only to the extent that Britain herself was recognised as being strong and ready.* And, if all else failed, and Britain was driven into isolation, 'an isolationist policy would undoubtedly require the greatest strength of all'. What was evidently impossible, at any rate for the time being, was to base any hope on negotiations for some degree of general disarmament. At last H.M. Government, in their own inner counsels, relinquished that hope which had inspired so much of their foreign and defence policy at least from the days of the second Labour administration down to the summer of 1935.

The recommended standards of security to be aimed at, and the means designed to achieve those standards in the three Services were then set out as follows.⁽⁷⁷⁾

* There are two interesting entries in Neville Chamberlain's diary for 1936—giving his views about the future of the League of Nations. In the first entry dated 27th April, he writes that he has been discussing the Abyssinian problem with Eden and argues that collective security in its present form has failed and that the League has shown itself unable to use pressure of any kind, whether military, financial or economic, effectively. He then goes on 'It [i.e. the League] should be kept in being as a moral force and focus, but for peace we would depend on a system of Regional Pacts to be registered and approved by the League. We should enter such as directly concern our interests, e.g. Locarno or Far East but should leave Eastern Europe to others.' A similar entry dated 17th June records that he had come 'out flat footed' in a speech to the 1900 Club 'with a statement that collective security based on sanctions had failed and that we should reform the League and develop a series of regional pacts.' Chamberlain clearly argues that Eden was in agreement with him in these views.

The Royal Navy

Since 1932, Britain's standard of naval strength had, for practical purposes, been based on the following formula:

'We should be able to send to the Far East a fleet sufficient to provide cover against the Japanese fleet; we should have sufficient forces behind this shield for the protection of our territories and Mercantile Marine against Japanese attack; and at the same time we should be able to retain in European waters a force sufficient to act as a deterrent and to prevent the strongest European Naval Power from obtaining control of the vital home terminal areas while we can make the necessary redispersions.'⁽⁷⁸⁾*

This somewhat optimistic adaptation of the One-Power Standard had now clearly been proved inadequate since Germany was no longer bound by the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty and since Japan had now embarked on a new construction programme. It was now estimated that, by 1942, Germany would have five new capital ships as well as three 'pocket-battleships', while Japan would, by the same date, have completed at least two new capital ships. In these circumstances, a serious emergency in the Far East would leave Britain with no margin of security in the event of a threatening situation in the West, even assuming superior fighting efficiency. The D.R.C. then went on to warn the Cabinet in terms which echo back to the original Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, and forward to the dark days of December 1941:

'We cannot over-emphasise the difficulties of conducting naval warfare against highly efficient enemies in two theatres so widely separated. The present troubles with Italy, which have necessitated the concentration in the Mediterranean of naval forces from all over the world, including the Far East, afford some slight indication. But it would be suicidal folly to blind our eyes to the possibility of a simultaneous or practically simultaneous threat on both fronts; and if we do not possess forces sufficient to provide a deterrent this double emergency is the more likely to occur. If there is danger from Japan at all, it reaches its maximum from the point of view both of probability and extent when we are preoccupied in Europe. Unless we can provide a sufficient defence for that emergency, Australia, New Zealand, India, Burma, the rich Colonies East of Suez and a vast trade will be at their mercy, and the Eastern half of the British Empire might well be doomed.'⁽⁷⁹⁾

* See above, p. 120.

In these circumstances the Committee considered that a new standard of naval strength should, at least in the long run, be aimed at. Such a new standard should, in the first place, enable Britain to place in the Far East a Fleet fully adequate to act on the defensive and to serve as a strong deterrent against any threat to her interests in that part of the world. Secondly, by such a standard, Britain should be able to maintain in all circumstances in Home Waters a force able to meet the requirements of war with Germany at the same time. To achieve all this would demand a Two-Power Standard for the long term future and a major programme of naval construction additional to what was already contemplated for the next three years.

All those concerned, however, the Admiralty, the D.R.C. and Ministers, were agreed that it would be unwise to try to decide upon the details of such a standard without more careful investigation, particularly of the future building programmes of other Powers. It was, for example, possible that Japan contemplated a far more ambitious programme than the Admiralty suspected at the moment. Moreover, for practical reasons, those of material and personnel, it was not considered possible to increase the Navy to the new standard within the present planning period of three years. For example, in the case of capital ships there was already so much replacement leeway to be made up, and construction facilities were now so limited because of a reduced programme since 1922 and the almost complete disappearance of foreign orders, that within the next three years, i.e. down to 1939, the Admiralty could do little more than commence the replacement of over-age and out-of-date ships in order to bring the Navy abreast of the present approved standard dating back to 1932. Further, a substantial expansion programme implied a large addition to the personnel of the fleet. The Admiralty, though anxious to decide upon and attain the new standard as soon as possible, did not wish to adopt, in recruitment and training, methods which in their view might prejudice the efficiency of the Service.

In these circumstances it was decided to ask the Admiralty to work out the details required to give effect to the proposed new standard, involving all types of vessels, and to make suggestions about any items in such a new programme which could be put in hand before the expiration of the next three years. Further, actually to put in hand during the next three years a new building and modernisation programme which would give effect to the existing accepted standard and, in particular, enable the Royal Navy to keep abreast in new ships with Germany and Japan on the strength of the assumed current building programme of those two Powers. This meant, in effect, a replacement programme of seven capital ships in the years 1936-39; a replacement programme of five cruisers a year during the

same period; four new aircraft carriers to be built within the years 1936-42; and, finally, a further flotilla of destroyer leaders in 1936-37 and a flotilla of destroyers in alternate years up to 1942.⁽⁸⁰⁾

The Cabinet were insistent that these details should be regarded as provisional. They were equally insistent that nothing should be said in the forthcoming Defence White Paper as to the possibility of the adoption in the near future of a new standard of naval strength, justifying their attitude on the ground that the Admiralty had still to undertake an investigation into the details involved. They also decided that, whereas the capital ship replacement programme involved seven ships in three years, only the two to be laid down in the 1936 programme should be mentioned in the White Paper. Very summary conclusions in the relevant Cabinet Minutes indicate that the continuing controversy of aircraft versus battleships was, in part, the reason for this reticence.⁽⁸¹⁾

Three points are worth noting about the naval part of the new programme. First, the problem of a Two-Power Standard had at last been raised even if not faced. The illusion of the sufficiency of a One-Power Standard for a nation with world-wide interests and responsibilities had at length been dispelled. Second, despite this, and at least partly because of the run-down of naval strength and production capacity over the past fifteen years, it was impossible for the time being to do more than bring the Navy up to its accepted, but now admittedly insufficient standard. Third, it is somewhat surprising that the Admiralty which, in June 1935, pressed so hard for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement should now, only a few months later, put forward that same Agreement as one reason for contemplating a much larger Navy.

The Army

The D.R.C. had recommended, as the standard of security for the Army:

- ‘(i) To maintain garrisons overseas on the present general basis for purposes of Imperial Defence.
- (ii) To provide for the military share in Home Defence, which includes anti-aircraft defence, coast defence and internal security.
- (iii) To enable us to provide reinforcements and/or a Field Force from Home in time of emergency or war with adequate equipment and reserves.’⁽⁸²⁾

Under the first and second headings the most important requirements were a substantial improvement in coast defences at naval

bases at home and abroad, and the completion of the Army's share in the Air Defence of Great Britain. Proposals under these two heads raised no serious difficulties and were substantially approved by the Cabinet. Suggestions made under the third head, however, proved to be more controversial.

The D.R.C. argued, as they had done in their first Report, that it was important to organise a Field Force which could be sent abroad at short notice for the protection of Britain's vital interests, and to enable her to honour her international obligations, particularly under the Treaty of Locarno. This latter would involve further effective co-operation with the other signatories of Locarno on the Continent of Europe, including the occupation by Britain and her allies and the denial to an enemy, of advanced air bases in the Low Countries. This proposed role for the Army was argued to require a Regular Field Force contingent of four divisions, a mobile (cavalry) division, two Air Defence Brigades, and the Army Co-operation squadrons of the Royal Air Force, together with the necessary complement of G.H.Q., Corps and L. of C. troops, the whole provided with all its essential needs as regards modern armament and material. This would form the first contingent of the Field Force, and would number about 155,000 men. It was further argued that additional money should be spent on speeding up mobilisation plans so that part of the force could be disembarked on the Continent after one week and the remainder a week later.

But that was not all. The Committee then went on to recommend that the Field Force, if sent to the Continent, should be reinforced at intervals on a substantial scale. It was proposed that contingents of the Territorial Army, fully equipped on a modern scale, should be despatched as follows:

- 10 A contingent of four divisions at four months after the outbreak
11 of war.
- 12 A second contingent of four divisions at six months after the
13 outbreak of war.
- 14 A third contingent of four divisions eight months after the
15 outbreak of war.

For this the Committee recommended an outlay of £26 million to provide for the modernisation of the 12 Territorial divisions in order to give them the necessary materials to take part in a modern war.⁽⁸³⁾ The Committee considered that, given the acceptance of proposals for improving output which they were later to make, all four contingents could be in sight of their complete requirements within five years. On the other hand it was admitted that, within the three years, 1936-39, it would be materially possible to carry out this

programme only to the extent of about 80 per cent for the first (Regular) contingent of the Field Force.

Ministers at the next stage, when they took over from D.R.C., accepted most of the arguments on which these proposals were based. In their own Report they said:

'We feel that we should inform the Cabinet that we have very closely considered the importance of the Low Countries to our own security in its air aspects. The Chiefs of Staff have on more than one occasion emphasised the strategical importance of the Low Countries. . . . We are prepared to accept the renewed advice given to us . . . as to the need for modernising and making good the deficiencies of the Regular Army.

. . . If our assistance to Continental Allies is to be effective, the Regular Field Force contingent must be available as soon as possible. . . .'⁽⁸⁴⁾

Proposals concerning the Territorial Army, however, met with a different fate. It was argued that since, in fact, little could be done during the next three years towards the actual provision of the material needed to modernise the Territorial Army and to equip it for war, then it would be better to reserve a decision about the equipment and employment of the Territorial Army for the present. In the meantime, a sum of £250,000 per year should be authorised for improving the admittedly inadequate equipment and aids to training for the Territorial Army. In many ways this was not an unreasonable recommendation. Since all were agreed that the Territorial Army could get little of its suggested share during the full three years, then there was something to be said for postponing a decision on so substantial a matter until it acquired a genuine air of practicality. But the discussions which led to this decision also leave the impression that Ministers were not yet ready to accept the full implications of sending an Expeditionary Force, once again, to Europe. No one was now suggesting, what had been commonly believed before August 1914, that the war, if and when it came, could only be a brief one. But if it was to be a prolonged campaign, then it made little sense to propose a small Regular contingent with little hope of effective reinforcement.

The Cabinet, in coming to its final conclusion, took the view of the Ministerial Committee. The proposals concerning the Regular contingent of the Field Force were accepted, but nothing was to be done to make possible reinforcement by the Territorial Army. Moreover the Cabinet decided that the words quoted above, 'If our assistance to our Continental Allies is to be effective', should be amended to read 'If our assistance required abroad is to be effective'. On the other hand it did also decide that, while accepting the present limited

proposals for the Territorial Army, it would not rule out a re-examination of the whole Territorial Army problem should it be found possible to make a start with its re-equipment before the end of three years.⁽⁸⁵⁾ These matters were to come up for much discussion between the spring of 1936 and that of 1939.

The Air Force

The main recommendations concerning the Royal Air Force were two-fold. First, clear backing for the scheme, already approved in May 1935,* for a metropolitan first line strength of 123 squadrons (1,512 aircraft) by April 1937. It was noted by Ministers, however, that there was increasing evidence that Germany was not likely to be content with a figure of less than 2,000 first-line aircraft. Therefore, if parity was to be achieved and maintained, the Air Ministry should have discretion to vary the R.A.F. programme so as to improve its offensive power and constitute the most effective deterrent against German aggression. Clearly, this might well involve an increase in numbers in addition to the substitution of larger and more efficient aircraft for those envisaged in the latter part of the current programme.

At the meeting when they accepted these recommendations the Cabinet also considered and agreed to a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Air on the Air Striking Force.⁽⁸⁶⁾ In this paper the Secretary of State for Air stated that it was now possible, during the longer period for rearmament being considered, i.e. up to the end of the financial year 1938-39, to organise a much more effective air striking force than had been approved the previous year. The light bombers now on order would continue to be useful for training purposes and for service overseas; but for the purpose of the striking force it was proposed, during the longer period, to replace them by medium bombers. In addition, it was proposed to increase the aircraft establishment of certain squadrons. The striking force, i.e. the bomber element of the Metropolitan Air Force, would then number 1,022 aircraft, of which even the lightest, the smaller medium bombers, would include the whole of western Germany in their range. These proposals involved an addition of 182 aeroplanes to the already agreed figure of 1,512 for first-line strength, and would not interfere with the plan to achieve the latter figure by April 1937. Secondly, it was proposed to rectify the lack of balance in earlier expansion programmes by providing substantial war reserves of material and personnel, including 150 per cent war reserves of aircraft.⁽⁸⁷⁾ Finally, important additional provision was made both for overseas squad-

* See above, Chapter V, Section 4.

rons and for Army Co-operation squadrons to accompany the Field Force. Provision for the Royal Air Force was, on this occasion, bound to be less spectacular and less expensive than for the other two Services. Its programmes, as we have seen, had already been expanded well beyond the limits of the first deficiency programme, and one of the basic purposes of the present programme was to bring the other two Services into line.

Two further aspects of this programme as accepted by the Cabinet and, in an abbreviated form, presented to Parliament in March 1936 are worth noting. First, in cost it was a programme which went far beyond the very cautious limits set in 1934. The original total defence estimates for the financial year 1935-36 had been £124 million; the increases above that total now decided upon by the Cabinet were estimated as follows for each of the next five years:

| | |
|------|------------------------------|
| 1936 | £ 50,700,000 |
| 1937 | £ 88,800,000 |
| 1938 | £101,500,000 |
| 1939 | £ 80,500,000 |
| 1940 | £ 73,000,000 ⁽⁸⁸⁾ |

Although the Cabinet showed some anxiety that whatever was disclosed in the 1936 White Paper on Defence should not add up to a larger sum than public opinion was anticipating, they displayed in their own discussions a very different attitude to the problem of defence finance from the extreme caution which had been so evident only as recently as 1934. And while this could, no doubt, be explained to some extent by the general improvement in the national economy, it was, even more, the product of a much sharpened awareness of national danger.

Secondly, some important new decisions were taken on the subject of industrial production. In their terms of reference of the summer of 1935 the D.R.C. had been asked to enquire into:

'What special measures would be required for increasing factory output so as to provide the material required within the period named, and what would be the cost of those measures.'⁽⁸⁹⁾

The Committee decided that the only method by which larger peace-time deficiencies in war material could be supplied, and at the same time a potential be built up for the much larger quantities required after the outbreak of war, was by the expansion of the 'Shadow' armament industry.

The 'Shadow' factory scheme had originally been proposed to and approved by the C.I.D. in May 1934.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Briefly, the principle of the scheme was that firms which normally did not make military

stores should be engaged to do so by placing with them orders in peace-time on a relatively small scale, on condition that they laid out their works and held machinery for a war output greatly in excess of their peace production. While the scheme was intended to apply essentially to new firms it could also be applied to existing contractors in order to extend their war potential. Initial steps for the creation of such a shadow armaments industry had already been taken by the Principal Supply Officers' organisation.

In considering the recommendation that the 'Shadow' scheme be expanded Ministers recognised both the immediate need for increased output to meet the demands of new approved programmes and also the future need for a reserve capacity which could be brought into operation very soon after the outbreak of war. The original scheme of 1934 had been intended very largely for war purposes, i.e. to facilitate the turnover of normal peace-time industry to greatly increased war production as quickly as possible. Both Ministers and officials now warned the Government that it had become similarly necessary to step up peace-time production, since the new programmes could not be dealt with, as hitherto, by Government factories and the specialist armament firms on their own. In other words, since the immediate need was so great, and since it was still Government policy to satisfy defence needs without interfering with normal production, then it was vital, not merely to create 'Shadow' production for future use, but to put some part of it into operation in the very near future.⁽⁹¹⁾

In accepting these recommendations, which also included the advice that existing machinery for co-ordinating the supply demands of the Services should remain approximately the same, the Cabinet emphasised that the supply of labour for the purposes of the defence programmes was likely to constitute a grave problem. It had been estimated that something like an additional 120,000 men, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled would be required. And it was already thought that a situation might arise in which it would be necessary to ration skilled labour between the various military supply organisations, on the one hand, and the export and general trade of the country on the other.⁽⁹²⁾

Whatever its limits, in its scope and in its general forward-looking quality the Third Deficiency Programme was a landmark in Britain's defence policy between the wars. It was, from the point of view of the three Services as a whole, the first major step in rearmament. And, had its preparation been timed a few months later, to follow rather than to precede Germany's military reoccupation of the Rhineland, it is possible that yet more would have been proposed. In presenting the new Defence Programme to the House on 9th March 1936 the Prime Minister stressed that the objective of Britain's foreign

policy was, as always, world peace by means of collective security through the League of Nations. Therefore efforts to achieve disarmament would go on. But the disappointing results to date left H.M. Government no alternative but to review the state of the country's defences in order first to fulfil obligations under the League Covenant and secondly to safeguard ourselves. The truth was that, if the countries of Europe wanted to stop an aggressor by making him realise that his actions would bring the whole force of the League against him, then they would have to be much readier for war than they were at present. When the present crisis was over (Germany had just reoccupied the Rhineland) Europe would have to decide whether to prepare to trust to the development of some system of collective security in future. 'I hope she will', said Mr. Baldwin, 'but it will not be done in a day'. No one could think Britain's forces would be used for aggression, and indeed the new proposals which were intended to show we were in earnest, dealt only with what was clearly necessary in existing circumstances.⁽⁹³⁾

Opposition criticism was of mixed nature. Mr. Attlee, for the Labour Party, complained that the emphasis was far too much on national defences and should, in fact, be placed on the methods by which the use of force could be made to work within a scheme of collective security. Sir Archibald Sinclair, for the Liberal opposition, criticised faults in the mechanics of defence organisation and a lack of clarity about the proper distribution of effort between the three Services. Yet, though Attlee roundly condemned the purposes for which, in his view, Britain's rearmament was being planned, he expressly claimed that his party was not against military defences as such. The Liberal leader was more explicit on this point. Welcoming Attlee's statements that the Labour Party was prepared 'to put up the forces necessary' for collective security, he went on:

'In the circumstances in which we meet this afternoon, it seems to me clear that the denunciation of any expenditure upon the modernisation and equipment of the British land, Naval or Air forces could only be justified in principle from the point of view of non-resisting pacifism.'⁽⁹⁴⁾

It was left to Mr. Churchill to criticise the programme on the ground that too little rather than too much was being planned. In a carefully reasoned and moderate speech he argued for far greater and more rapid preparation of labour and industry for the critical weeks immediately after the outbreak of war. He clearly sensed, as the Government's advisers and Ministers had already done, that a major defence problem for modern industrial nations is to gear war production into peace-time industry on the one hand without destroying its civilian purposes and yet, on the other, to be ready both

to provide the military resources necessary in peace and the far greater ones that become vital on the outbreak of war.

'Here', he said, 'in a nutshell is the history of munitions production. First year, very little; second year, not much, but something; third year, almost all you want; fourth year, more than you need. We are only at the beginning of the second year, whereas Germany is already, in many respects, at the end of the third.'⁽⁹⁵⁾

If that was an exaggeration of Germany's accomplishments by the spring of 1936 it was, on a comparative basis, no underestimate of our own. It remained to be seen whether the new programme was capable of reducing the gap.⁽⁹⁶⁾

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| (81) Cab. Cons. 10(36). A Capital Ship Committee was set up, at this time, to investigate and report on this and related questions; see Chatfield, <i>op. cit.</i> , II, Chapter XIV., Cmd. 5107 | 261 |
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- (91) For some account of the development of the 'Shadow' factory scheme before September 1939, see M. M. Postan, *British War Production* (H.M.S.O., 1952), Chapters I-III, and J. D. Scott and R. Hughes, *The Administration of War Production* (H.M.S.O., 1956) Part I. 266
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REARMAMENT: SERVICE PROGRAMMES.

PART III

Introduction

AT THE END of the last chapter it was stressed how much both thinking and practice about rearmament had changed between November 1933, when the D.R.C. began work on its deficiency report, and the spring of 1936 when the third report of that same Committee was finally accepted by the Cabinet and announced to the House of Commons in a Statement on Defence.⁽¹⁾ That change is most easily measured in financial terms. In 1934 a deficiency programme planned to cost rather more than £50 million had been added to annual Service estimates of a little under £120 million, the deficiency sum to be spent over five years. In 1936, with annual estimates admittedly up only a little at £124 million, the Government agreed to additional expenditure over the next five years of nearly £400 million.⁽²⁾

Striking though the change was, however, there were clear signs of further difficulties. What was being spent on defence preparations in Britain was known to be very much less than spending for similar purposes in Germany. The Nazi Government was reckoned already to be spending—outside the Budget—the equivalent of about £500 million per year on defence, well over double the amount planned for the greatly expanded programmes in Britain during each of the next five years.⁽³⁾ Again, some very important items in the D.R.C.'s third report had been dealt with inconclusively, and they were items directly related to major concepts of national and imperial strategy. A Two-Power Standard Navy had been suggested but not agreed to. But by the spring of 1936 it was already known that Japan would not sign another naval treaty and that, without her, no naval agreement could be of serious significance. A half and half programme had been adopted for the Army—a fully equipped small expeditionary force, but virtually no provision for the early reinforcement of it; and the signs of an even less ambitious programme for the Army were already apparent in ministerial discussions during the winter of 1935–36. If plans for the Royal Air Force were rather more specific and settled they were nevertheless subject—as ministers and their professional advisers were well aware—to the effect of developments in Germany which might be predicted but which certainly could not be controlled. Finally, while new life was being injected into the Shadow Factory Scheme, the basic attitude of 'business as usual' governed all production and supply aspects of work on the rearmament programmes. No direction of labour, no priority for defence

orders, no allocation of essential materials on short supply. Whether a successful armaments programme could be carried out on these terms still remained to be seen.

Given the still remaining uncertainties in our own programmes and the increasingly unsatisfactory international scene it is not surprising that defence expenditure continued to rise throughout 1936. What is more, the rises were often asked for or agreed to on a single Service basis rather than by the yardstick of an overall programme and, within each Service, additions were made to the existing programmes without attempting to find countervailing economies.⁽⁴⁾ Ad hoc changes appeared to be taking the place of comprehensive plans, and costs appeared to be constantly increasing without sufficient consideration of the country's ability to pay. From the Treasury point of view, therefore, there appeared to be a strong argument for deciding on the financial limits to rearmament costs and then, within those limits, establishing an order of priority between more and less important items.

By the early summer of 1937 conditions were all in favour of making such a review. In May of that year Mr. Chamberlain succeeded Mr. Baldwin as Prime Minister. As his Chancellor of the Exchequer Chamberlain appointed Sir John Simon, a man who shared many of Chamberlain's views on government finance in general and on defence finance in particular. As his Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence Chamberlain retained Sir Thomas Inskip, who had been appointed to that newly created office in March 1936. The appointment of a Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had been a compromise between those who wanted greater centralised power in these matters and those—like Sir Maurice Hankey—who believed that the committee system headed by the C.I.D. was adequate for the future as for the past. Many names had been canvassed for the new Ministerial post. Sir Austen Chamberlain did not want it. There were objections to Sir Samuel Hoare and Winston Churchill, to the latter because he might have kept everyone anxious with continual threats of war. Eventually the choice fell on Sir Thomas Inskip, formerly Attorney-General. It seems that Baldwin looked to Inskip for impartial help in complicated defence problems, relying on his judicial experience and ability to master a brief; to Neville Chamberlain it seemed that Inskip, while not the ideal man, was nonetheless 'strong and sound' and would 'make no friction with either the Chiefs of Staff or the Service Ministers'.⁽⁵⁾

Inskip was appointed after the third report of the D.R.C. had been received and largely accepted by the Cabinet. Moreover, with only a small private staff and no Department he was bound to work slowly. In fact, his impact on defence planning seems to have been small during his first year of office. But with Neville Chamberlain's pro-

motion to Prime Minister and Simon's to the Treasury Inskip came into his own. His views and his ways of working had much in common with those of both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and, together with them, he took a prominent part in the last major pre-war review of Britain's defence preparations in the autumn and winter of 1937-38. That review, much more specifically than any of the investigations of the D.R.C., was Treasury inspired and directed and its conclusions, following directly from its inspiration, led to changes of emphasis in strategic thinking which to some extent outlived the Munich crisis and persisted down to the spring of 1939. The lead in all this was undoubtedly given by the new Prime Minister who was now in a position to implement policies he had long supported; priority for the Royal Air Force, if not always in the shape the Air Staff wanted; a strong Navy, but directed against Germany and not designed to fight two major naval enemies at once; and an Army designed for imperial policing and small wars, not for 'Continental adventures'. But if the lead was given by the Prime Minister he was ably seconded by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. Indeed, during his second year in office the latter in practice became not so much a minister for defence matters as a minister with special responsibility for defence expenditure and for the shaping of strategy to conform to financial limitations. This is not to deny that defence expenditure continued to increase or to claim that Inskip himself was arbitrary or unreasoning in the arguments he used. Far from it. His basic argument, that economic and financial stability was the 'fourth arm of defence' was one which had been used before and was to be used again. It was, moreover, likely that if the armed Services failed to co-ordinate their plans then someone else would do so for them. And, in the end, the co-ordination which was effected during the winter of 1937-38 was undoubtedly supported by the large majority of ministers however much the pace may have been forced by a small inner Cabinet.

In this Part the comprehensive review of the winter of 1937-38 will be examined in detail. Then the story of each Service in the period 1936-39 will be looked at separately both in the context of that review and in the changed pattern of thinking which emerged to some extent after the Munich crisis but much more clearly only after the crisis of the spring of 1939.

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| (2) For details on both sets of figures, see the Tables and Appendices of D.R.C. 14 and D.R.C. 37 | 275 |
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| (5) Letter of Neville Chamberlain to his sisters, 14th March 1936. See also Middlemas and Barnes, <i>op. cit.</i> , Chapter 32 | 276 |

PART III

CHAPTER VIII⁽¹⁾

THE LIMITS ON REARMAMENT,
1937-39

1. *Financial Limits and Treasury Control, February 1937-April 1938*

THE STATEMENT Relating to Defence, of February 1937, indicated that the Government was thinking in terms of a total defence bill over a period of years as well as the proper distribution of that total between current revenue and loans. Authority was sought from Parliament for the 'issue of sums not exceeding in the aggregate £400 million, to be applied as appropriations in aid of the moneys provided by Parliament for the Defence Services over the five years from 1st April 1937 to 31st March 1942'.^{(2)*} The final paragraphs of the 1937 Defence White Paper argued that, while it was not possible to be exact about the total cost of a programme to be spread over a period of years and necessarily subject to modifications in changing conditions, and while it was difficult to determine what would be the peak year of defence expenditure, nonetheless 'it would be imprudent to contemplate a total expenditure on defence during the next five years of much less than £1,500 million'.^{(3)†} The Service Departments had not been asked to submit estimates of their total expenditure for each year of the quinquennium 1937-41 before this figure was published; indeed, it seems that they were unwilling to frame estimates as to the incidence of cost of the defence programmes over the next few years until further experience had been gained of their progress. In other words, the figure of £1,500 million was based on a general examination by the Treasury of the cost of the planned programmes as revealed in January 1937.⁽⁴⁾

It is clear that, during his last months in office as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Chamberlain was much exercised about the cost of the defence programme and set on foot a long-term review of their cost in relation to total national resources. When he became Prime Minister in May 1937 this review was not finished and was

* This figure was raised to £800 million in the spring of 1939.

† The rest of this total of £1,500 million, i.e. other than the new loan of £400 million, would be provided from annual revenue in the normal way.

handed on to his successor in office, Sir John Simon. The latter presented his report to the Cabinet at the end of June.⁽⁵⁾

The new Chancellor argued that, assuming both the current high rates of taxation and the growth of prosperity on which the efficacy of such taxation depended, then the amount of revenue available for the three Defence Services in the five years 1937-38 to 1941-42 would be £1,100 million. In addition, and in the same period, there was authority to borrow £400 million under the Defence Loans Act—a total of £1,500 million in all. 'If there is a set-back in trade', wrote the Chancellor, 'indeed, if prosperity does not increase—the sum available is likely to be less and even very substantially less.'

The Chancellor's anxieties were based upon the steadily rising cost of programmes both undertaken and planned, and in the increases of estimated running costs once those programmes had been completed. The following table was used to illustrate this point.

Table 3

Comparative Cost of Defence Programmes, 1934, 1936 and 1937

| | Capital Cost £ million |
|---|------------------------|
| First, D.R.C. Report, February 1934; Worst deficiencies only | 90 |
| Third, D.R.C. Report as amended by Cabinet, February 1936 | 245 |
| Forecast of January 1937 | 426 |

In addition, the cost of the new naval construction programmes for 1936 and 1937, previously estimated at about £64 million, had in fact risen to £110 million. Moreover, since the previous February, the cost of the Army approved programme had risen from £177 million to £214 million: while proposals for additions to the programme, still under consideration, would add at least another £43 million. There were further increases in services connected with defence preparations but outside the scope of Defence Votes. For example, within the past year the estimates for Air Raid precautions and for food storage had each risen by more than £20 million.

'Figures such as these', wrote the Chancellor, 'indicate the pace at which the cost to be met continues to grow and show that there is at present no trace of finality. We are running the gravest risks if we do not resolutely insist on correlating the rising total burden of Defence liabilities to the whole of our available resources. Indeed, the means of correlation is, under existing practice, rapidly breaking down.'

The Chancellor went on to clinch his argument by pointing out that rising capital costs were, at least in part, due to planning for forces which, when completed, would impose on the national

economy maintenance costs which could not be met 'except at an intolerable level of taxation or after a startling reversal of accepted policy in regard to social expenditure'. The time had therefore come both for a general review of the rearmament position, and for the introduction of a procedure, additional to the normal arrangements for Cabinet approval and the ordinary processes of Treasury control, to regulate current and future expenditure on defence'.⁽⁶⁾

At the ensuing Cabinet discussion there was agreement that decisions already taken should be implemented and not re-opened for further discussion. Equally, there appears to have been no serious opposition to the view put forward by the Prime Minister (a view clearly held by the Chancellor as well) that the proper procedure was to arrive first at a global total of the expenditure contemplated by all the Services, including Air Raid precautions. After that it would be the task of the Treasury to provide some estimate of what could be spent. Should there prove to be a difference between these two totals, then there would have to be a decision on how what was available should be subdivided among the various Departments and, after that, each Department concerned would have to say for itself which items within its own estimates should be reduced. The only protest this plan evoked was that the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Duff Cooper, and the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Swinton, said that, for their part in these calculations, each would make two estimates—one based on approved programmes subject to financial limits, the other on what was considered strategically desirable.⁽⁷⁾

The Cabinet then accepted the recommendations of the Chancellor that the Service Departments, in consultation with the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence should be asked:

- '1. . . . to estimate anew the period of time required for the completion of their programmes;
2. on the basis of the programme as now sanctioned and of the rising trend of prices to submit estimates of the total requirements of voted money, year by year during that period, and
3. on the like basis to submit estimates of their normal total annual expenditure in the years following the completion of the programme.'

In the meantime, although decisions on new projects of major importance were to be postponed, there was to be no reversal of decisions governing defence expenditure already taken by the Cabinet, nor any move to prevent the Service Departments from carrying out these decisions.⁽⁸⁾

The forecasts of the Service Departments,⁽⁹⁾ and comments on them by the Chancellor of the Exchequer,⁽¹⁰⁾ were ready by mid-October, and were considered by the Cabinet at their meeting on the

27th of that month.⁽¹¹⁾ The Chancellor of the Exchequer, at this stage, did little more than summarise the evidence presented to him, leaving the implications—both financial and military—to be deduced by his colleagues. The important conclusion was that, given the D.R.C. standard Fleet,* Scheme F for the Royal Air Force,[†] and an Army of four divisions and one mobile division for the regular contingent of the Field Force, together with equipment to enable the Territorial Army to be trained in the same weapons as the Regular Army, then the estimated total expenditure in the years 1937-41 would be about £1,470 million. If, however, the New Standard Fleet were to receive official approval, and if the Royal Air Force were to be allowed to adopt its new Scheme J,[‡] then the estimated cost over the same period would be about £1,717 million. The Chancellor pointed out that these forecasts were not, and for a variety of technical reasons could not be exact. But he also emphasised that they were based on the price levels taken for the purpose of framing the 1937 Estimates, and that, already since that time, there had been 'in some cases a substantial increase in wage rates and prices'. In addition he warned the Cabinet that, in his view, the great increase in defence expenditure, present and prospective, was attributable above all to the technical development of modern armaments, and that so long as the strongest Powers spared no effort in the application of scientific developments to armament technique, the cost of weapons was almost certain to rise.⁽¹²⁾

At its meeting on 27th October 1937 the Cabinet was not able to reach any firm conclusions on the evidence as presented so far. Quite apart from minor omissions and variations which, in fact, in sum total might amount to something of critical importance, there was still undecided the major problem of whether currently accepted or more ambitious and as yet unaccepted future programmes should form the basis of future estimates. It was therefore decided to refer the whole problem of long-term defence programmes and their cost to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence; he in turn would, of course, carry out his review in consultation with the Treasury, the Defence Departments, and other Departments specially concerned.⁽¹³⁾

Sir Thomas Inskip, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, presented an interim report to the Cabinet in the following December. This report was less a detailed examination of actual and prospective Service programmes than a statement of the general principles upon which such programmes should be based and also the decisions

* See above, p. 260; below, Chapter IX, Section 2.

† See below, Chapter XV, Section 1.

‡ See below, Chapter XV, Section 2.

on priorities which, however awkward, would have to be taken in order to bring principles and practice into line. Since the principles enunciated by the Minister were substantially approved by the Cabinet and remained, on the whole, the guide lines within which the defence programmes of this vital period were confined, it is worth examining the paper in some detail.

There was, first, a general analysis of what should be the proper relationship between the defence programmes and available national resources:

'In considering whether we can afford this or that programme', wrote the Minister, 'the first question asked is how much the programme will cost; and the cost of the programme is then related to the sums which can be made available from Exchequer resources, from taxation, or exceptionally from the proceeds of loans. But the fact that the problem is considered in terms of money, must not be allowed to obscure the fact that our real resources consist not of money, i.e. paper pounds which are nothing more than a symbol, but of our manpower and productive capacity, our power to maintain our credit, and the general balance of our trade.'

Owing to its shortage of native raw materials and foodstuffs, this country is particularly dependent upon imports which have to be paid for and can only be paid for if the volume of our export trade is not impaired. This factor of the general balance of our trade is closely connected with our credit. The amount of money which we can borrow without inflation is mainly dependent upon two factors: the savings of the country as a whole which are available for investment, and the maintenance of confidence in our financial stability. But these savings would be reduced and confidence would at once be weakened by any substantial disturbance of the general balance of trade. While if we were to raise sums in excess of the sums available in the market, the result would be inflation; i.e. a general rise in prices which would have an immediate effect upon our export trade.

The maintenance of credit facilities and our general balance of trade are of vital importance, not merely from the point of view of our strength in peace-time, but equally for purposes of war. This country cannot hope to win a war against a major Power by a sudden knock-out blow; on the contrary, for success we must contemplate a long war, in the course of which we should have to mobilise all our resources and those of the Dominions and other countries overseas. This is no new conception. The report of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on Planning for a War with Germany⁽¹⁴⁾ . . . was based on the general conception that Germany is likely to be the aggressor and will endeavour "to exploit her superior preparedness by trying to knock out Great Britain rapidly, or to knock out France

rapidly, since she is not well placed for a long war in which the Sea Powers, as in the past, are likely to have the advantage". We must therefore confront our potential enemies with the risks of a long war, which they cannot face. If we are to emerge victoriously from such a war, it is essential that we should enter it with sufficient economic strength to enable us to make the fullest uses of resources overseas, and to withstand the strain.

While, therefore, it is true that the extent of our resources imposes limitations upon the size of the defence programmes which we are able to undertake, this is only one aspect of the matter. Seen in its true perspective, the maintenance of our economic stability would more accurately be described as an essential element in our defensive strength: one which can properly be regarded as a fourth arm in defence, alongside the three Defence Services, without which purely military effort would be of no avail.

Important as these considerations are, there is another and no less powerful reason why we should avoid at all costs any action at the present time which would affect our stability. Nothing operates more strongly to deter a potential aggressor from attacking this country than our stability, and the power which this nation has so often shown of overcoming its difficulties without violent change, and without damage to its inherent strength. This reputation stands us in good stead, and causes other countries to rate our powers of resistance at something far more formidable than is implied merely by the number of men of war, aeroplanes and battalions which we should have at our disposal immediately on the outbreak of war. But were other countries to detect in us signs of strain, this deterrent would at once be lost.

These considerations are of the first importance, but there are others which must be taken into account. The whole trend of modern armaments is in the direction of reliance on mechanised forces, capable of dealing a knock-out blow in a few weeks or months. If our superior staying-power is to be brought to bear to bring us victory in war, we must maintain forces strong enough to ensure us against defeat by a sudden blow.

Not only must we be strong enough to withstand a knock-out blow, but we must be seen to be strong. So long as our armaments are believed to be below the level of safety, our all-important influence for the maintenance of peace will suffer, and we shall be liable to successive rebuffs which will reduce that influence still further. Indeed, so far as there has been any improvement in the international situation within recent times, it is largely due to our rearmament. In the interests of peace we cannot afford that an impression should grow up that we are relaxing our efforts.

The problem before the Cabinet is, therefore, to strike a proper balance between these factors, and to determine the size

and character of the forces which will suffice to ward off defeat in the early days of war, and will enable us to exercise our rightful influence for peace, without making demands on our resources which would impair our stability, and our staying power in peace and war.'⁽¹⁵⁾

On the broad aspects of the relationship between the cost of the present programmes and the sums available for defence as determined on the principles just analysed, Sir Thomas Inskip reached almost exactly the same conclusions as those of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his reports of the previous June and October. Working on the double hypothesis basis adopted both by the Navy and Air Force in presenting their forecasts and by the Chancellor in summarising them,* he argued that under hypothesis A (i.e. roughly the D.R.C. standard with some minor changes) the total expenditure on defence in the five years 1937-41, and including defence expenditure borne on the Civil Votes, would be about £1,605 million. Under hypothesis B, i.e. more elaborate schemes, mainly changes involved in adopting the New Standard Fleet and Scheme 'J' for the Royal Air Force, the total would be £1,884 million. For the succeeding five years, 1942-46, the relevant totals on the same basis would be £1,282 million under hypothesis A and £1,617 million under hypothesis B. These totals would include both maintenance costs and also non-recurrent expenditure on bringing the defence forces up to the new standards implied in the programmes. Sir Thomas Inskip also made it clear that his talks with the Service Ministers had revealed that no provision, or at the most only an inadequate one, had been made for a number of possible additions to the programmes which must be regarded as likely to mature during the period under consideration.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Treasury saw no reason to alter the view that, on the average, £220 million a year could be found from revenue for defence over the five years 1937-41. In addition, provision had been made for borrowing a further £400 million during the same period.† But it was argued that, since the spring, borrowing had already become more difficult. If it were decided that it was necessary to spend more than £1,500 million over these years, it would probably follow that the excess would have to be found by an increase in the level of taxation rather than by seeking additional powers to borrow. While admitting the impossibility of predicting the revenue five years hence the Treasury, taking an average expectation of taxation on the basis of the existing rates, considered that the highest figure which it would

* The double hypothesis mentioned above (p. 281) i.e. existing approved programmes subject to financial limitations, and programmes considered strategically desirable.

† See above, p. 280.

be reasonable to envisage as likely to be available for defence on average year by year after 1942 was £200 million.

What emerged from these calculations, assuming their broad accuracy, were three conclusions. First, given the programmes so far envisaged but ignoring probable additions to them, then the total expenditure on defence would be of manageable proportions up to March 1942, but would be substantially in excess of the sum likely to be available, on average, for defence thereafter. Second, some increases on the basis of the existing accepted programmes were already being asked for—for example, the implementation of the full 'Ideal' scheme for the Air Defence of Great Britain—and these items, many of them high priority, would be also considerably in excess of the sums available. If fully fledged new schemes, for example the New Standard Fleet, were accepted, then the excess would be very much greater. Third, it was now clear that the permanent costs of maintenance of the Services, on completion of the present programmes, would be very much higher than when the programmes were launched and—so argued the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence and the Treasury—if the country proceeded as at present it stood in grave danger of building up defence forces out of borrowed money which it would be beyond the nation's power to maintain out of revenue.

'The best estimate of the whole position which can be given', wrote the Minister, 'is that, on the basis of the present level of taxation, and bearing in mind the heavy annual maintenance costs which will result in future years when the extended programmes now proposed have been completed, every effort must be made to bring the total defence expenditure over the 5 years 1937-41 within the total of £1,500 million. If, however, the immediate international situation should be judged so serious as to involve expenditure above this figure, the excess can only be met by heavy increases in taxation, since the greater part of our civil expenditure results automatically from social legislation, the benefits of which cannot in fact be reduced, except at a time of grave financial emergency, and then only with serious political consequences.'

In his explanation of the great increase in the cost of rearmament over what had been envisaged even at the time of the third Report of the D.R.C., Sir Thomas Inskip singled out two factors of critical importance. The first was the increasing elaborateness and, therefore, expensiveness of modern armaments. This was a general tendency which could not be avoided. But Inskip claimed that substantial sums could be saved if the Defence Departments were to devote more attention to ensuring that the articles put into produc-

tion were not only more efficient but had also been designed with a view to economical manufacture.

'It is a commonplace', he wrote, 'that in time of war it is often impossible to obtain the best possible article and that something short of perfection has to be accepted in order to obtain delivery of the number of articles required within the time available. Unless Departments pay the utmost attention to this matter, I do not think that we shall obtain the best value from the resources which can be made available for defence.'

The second factor responsible for the great increase in the cost of rearmament, Inskip argued, arose from the assumptions made by the Defence Departments as to the potential enemies against whom Britain must make defence preparations. 'From the point of view of the present report' he wrote, 'it must be clearly stated that in the long run the provision of adequate defences within the means at our disposal will only be achieved when our long-term foreign policy has succeeded in changing the present assumptions as to our potential enemies'.⁽¹⁷⁾

His contention arising out of this examination was that piecemeal changes and the threat of excessive expenditure now made necessary a review of the whole range of the defence programmes in order to determine which items had the first claim to early completion and which items must, if necessary, be excluded or at least postponed. Such a review, implying a single policy for the programmes both of the Defence Departments and of the Civil Departments concerned with defence matters, should be based on the risks of the existing international situation, but should also, as far as possible, take into account the changes in that situation which it was reasonable to expect and those changes which it should be the aim of foreign policy to bring about. Given these broad background conditions, then the more specifically military principles of national and imperial defence policy were, it was argued, straightforward. The corner stone of such a policy was to maintain the security of the United Kingdom, for in the resources of the United Kingdom lay the Empire's main strength. Unless those resources could be maintained substantially unimpaired, both in peace and in a long period of hostilities, then ultimate defeat in a major war was certain, irrespective of what might happen in other and secondary theatres. From this it was argued that the main defence effort, apart from the protection of the United Kingdom itself, must be directed to two consequent objectives—the protection of the trade routes on which the country depended for essential imports of food and raw materials, and the maintenance of forces for the defence of British territories overseas. The fourth objective—and one which could properly be provided

for only if the other obligations had been met—was co-operation in the defence of the territories of any allies Britain might have in war.

The detailed application of these principles of national and imperial defence enunciated by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was far from being entirely new. Put briefly, what the Minister said was that, in the first place,

‘... if we are to avoid heavy increases in taxation and permanent annual defence maintenance expenditure after 1942 substantially in excess of any sum which we can make available for defence purposes, every effort must be made to bring the total defence expenditure within the 5 years 1937-41 within a total of £1,500 millions.’

In order to achieve the desired end within these financial limits, then the Admiralty should, for the present, restrict itself to a D.R.C. standard fleet; the Army should take as its primary role that of imperial commitments, and this was taken to include anti-aircraft defence at home; and the R.A.F. should concentrate on increases in the Metropolitan Air Force in preference to further increases overseas, with the further provision that fighter squadrons of the Metropolitan Force should be stepped up as much as possible.⁽¹⁸⁾

At meetings on 22nd December 1937 the Cabinet approved the principles on which the Minister's recommendations were based and also, with very slight modifications, the suggested detailed application of them. The Cabinet then made two further points of its own. First, that since the limitations which finance imposed on national defence placed also a heavy burden on diplomacy, then it was desirable to follow up, as soon as possible, the recent conversations between the Lord President of the Council, Lord Halifax, and Herr Hitler. Second, that with this same point in mind the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was to take up with the Service Departments the possibility of some limitation of bomber aircraft as well as other forms of quantitative disarmament in the hope of establishing ground for an agreement with Germany. These two points were connected. If Germany was to be made friendly on a long-term basis then some concessions, in colonial matters for example, might well be involved. But such a move would clearly not be acceptable to public opinion in Britain unless it was balanced by some concession by Germany. It had already been considered, and the line of thought had received some encouragement from the recent talks between Hitler and Halifax, that the German contribution might take the form of a measure of disarmament. The Prime Minister, at any rate at this point, seems to have thought this was a development the possibilities of which should be pursued.⁽¹⁹⁾

As part of their general directive given after long discussion on 22nd December 1937 the Cabinet then instructed the Service Departments to submit revised forecasts of the cost of their programmes over the next five years to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, and to do so in time to enable him to give a further report to the Cabinet in mid-February 1938.⁽²⁰⁾ The revision involved was to take account of the Minister's interim report in which he had, in fact, specifically mentioned matters on which he felt he required further information. Returns from the Defence Departments were duly made to the Minister and his report was ready by the end of the first week of February.⁽²¹⁾

The more important points in the revised separate Service estimates will be discussed in later chapters. What are important here are the total estimates and the implications of those totals. The cost of the revised forecasts, as submitted by the three Defence Departments, is shown in Table 4 on page 290.

Inskip pointed out that previous experience suggested that Departments constantly found it necessary to seek authority to add new items to their programmes. If, therefore, Departments were now to be authorised to proceed with the full execution of the programmes as here outlined, then the country would be faced with defence expenditure over the quinquennium not of £1,500 million as approved by the Cabinet, but with at least £2,000 million and probably more. He then reminded his colleagues of his earlier argument which they had already agreed with, that economic and financial stability constituted a fourth arm of defence, and that 'expenditure on defence of the order of £1,900-£2,000 million over five years would definitely impair that economic stability'. What is more, it had been accepted by all Ministers that 'nothing operates more strongly to deter a potential aggressor from attacking this country than our stability, but if other countries were to detect in us serious signs of strain, this deterrent would at once be lost.'

On the other hand, the Foreign Office view was that 1938 was likely to be a year of critical importance. Sir Thomas Inskip admitted, as he assumed his colleagues did, that 'it is necessary that no action on our part during those months should imply, or should seem to imply, any weakening in our resolve to press forward with our defence programmes resolutely by all practical means'. He then went on:

'This presentation of the position might seem to lead to the conclusion that unless, in disregard of the Cabinet decision of 22nd December 1937, we accept defence programmes costing nearly £2,000 million over the 5 years 1937-41, we shall be failing, at this critical moment, to press forward determinedly with our defence programmes; in other words, that we are faced

Table 4
Revised Forecasts of Defence Costs, February 1937
(£ million)

| Year | 1937 | 1938 | 1939 | 1940 | 1941 | Total for 5 years |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------------------|
| 1. Navy: | | | | | | |
| (a) D.R.C. Fleet . . . | 105.0 | 130.6 | 151.5 | 128.0 | 110.0 | 625.1 |
| (b) New Standard Fleet . | 105.0 | 130.6 | 152.0 | 141.5 | 138.0 | 667.1 |
| 2. War Office and R.O.F. . . | 90.7 | 118.6 | 137.5 | 124.5 | 105.1 | 576.4 |
| 3. Air | 82.5 | 110.5 | 128.0 | 129.5 | 117.0 | 567.5 |
| 4. Total of 1(a), 2, 3 . . . | 278.2 | 359.7 | 417.0 | 382.0 | 332.1 | 1,769.0 |
| 5. Total of 1(b), 2, 3 . . . | 278.2 | 359.7 | 417.5 | 395.5 | 360.1 | 1,811.0 ⁽²²⁾ |

With the addition of further items, e.g. interest and items on Civil Votes, the totals were:

| | £ million | £ million |
|---|-----------|-----------------------|
| 1. Expenditure shown in the revised forecasts of the Defence Department | 1,769 | or 1,811 |
| 2. Additional items listed by the Defence Departments (including War Office margin for contingencies) | 73 | 73 |
| Total of 1. and 2. | 1,842 | 1,884 |
| 3. Interest on advance under the Defence Loans Act, 1937, | 24 | |
| 4. Air Raid Precautions, say | 40 | |
| 5. Other civil defence measures, including Food Reserves, say | 20 | |
| Total of 3., 4. and 5. | 84 | 84 |
| Grand Total | 1,926 | 1,968 ⁽²³⁾ |

with an inexorable and immediate choice between two courses. The first involves heavily increased taxation, and a straining of our economic system, leading perhaps to another crisis, or a long and painful period of bad trade. The second course, in so far as it might be interpreted as a decision to restrict the defence programmes, might react upon the prospect of successful negotiations and might, therefore, be fraught with the danger of war.

If there were indeed no other possible course, the decision to be taken would be one of the utmost gravity. But further analysis of the position shows that there is another course open to us, by which we can avoid this dilemma, for the time being.

In the first place, the rate of progress of the defence programmes is subject to limitations imposed by the industrial conditions of the country, and in particular by the amount of skilled labour which can be made available without disrupting our peacetime industrial system, and by the capacity for the output of important articles which condition the progress of the programmes as a whole (e.g. armour plate and the whole range of optical instruments).

The rate of defence expenditure rose from £136 million in 1935 to £187 million in 1936. The estimates for 1937 were £278 million, but it is believed that expenditure will fall short of this figure. The burden thrown on industry by the large increase in expenditure in 1937 has been borne with reasonable success. Contributing factors to this have been the steps taken to enlist the help of industries through central bodies, as in the case of machine tools or optical glass, and the special arrangements made for continuous liaison between the Defence Departments and industry, as in the case of the steel industry and the building trade. There has also been a steady process of what is called "de-skilling" in the engineering trade, the practical result of which is to reduce the demand for skilled labour. The Defence Estimates for 1938 as presented will total about £345 million and it would seem reasonable to forecast that the limit of effective expenditure on present lines will be found at a figure somewhat but not much in excess of this. If heavy excess expenditure over such a figure were contemplated, it would appear that we must envisage war measures of compulsion on industry and labour, measures not only most difficult politically, but threatening the maintenance of that stability which it is an essential defence interest to preserve.

Secondly, although it is necessary for the Defence Departments to be able to plan relatively far ahead, this need not be carried to the extent of Departments being authorised at the beginning of 1938 to incur the full commitments involved in programmes the execution of which would extend up to March 1942. At the outset of the programme, the need for flexibility was emphasised; and experience has shown how necessary it is to retain the utmost flexibility consistent with efficient production.

The results of recent experiment and research add force to this view.

These considerations led to the conclusion that it is feasible to give Departments an authority which, on the one hand, will enable them to press forward resolutely in 1938 and 1939 (thus conforming to the needs of the international situation), and to spend, on a rising scale, substantially more in each of these two years than in 1937, but on the other hand will not involve commitments in excess of the aggregate total which, without imposing a breaking strain on our resources, can be found up to 1942.

It may be said that this course involves postponement of a decision on the defence programmes now presented. But it is surely right to postpone as long as possible a choice between the alternatives set out [above]. The course proposed has also the advantage that the further reviews of the defence programmes which I recommend should take place before the expiration of two years, would be undertaken in the light of improvements in the international situation which it is the object of our foreign policy to bring about.

At the same time, it is obvious that if no improvements take place, we shall be faced within two years with a choice between defence programmes which we cannot afford, and a failure to make defence preparations on an adequate scale.'

The compromise conclusions drawn by Inskip from the analysis were, first, that the Treasury now thought that, given the continuation of the current existing favourable conditions of trade, then it would probably be possible to finance a five-year defence programme of the order of £1,600-£1,650 million, and that on the basis of present rates of taxation and £400 million of borrowed money. It was also the view of the Minister and the Treasury, however, that there was no prospect of meeting the maintenance costs of such a programme, once it was concluded, out of revenue on the same taxation basis.* Therefore, after 1941, the country would be faced with the problem of reducing the defence services, or the social services, or of raising the necessary money by higher taxation or by additional power to borrow. In the meantime, however, the Minister recommended that the new total figure of £1,650 million should be accepted and that, of this total, £1,570 million should be allocated to the three Service Departments as the maximum of their spending power in the years 1937-41 inclusive.

The second step recommended by Sir Thomas Inskip was that the total figure available should be divided among the three Departments concerned, after consultation between himself, the

* The estimated gap between available money and this maintenance cost, from 1942 onwards, was reckoned to be over £50 million a year.

Service Ministers and their advisers, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It would then be the duty of each Service Department to carry out its programmes to effective completion, within the sum allotted, by March 1942. Although variations of expenditure between individual years would be permitted, the programmes were to be complete in themselves and no undertakings should be given that additions to them would be sanctioned.

Thirdly, he recommended that there should be a further enquiry in 1939 in order to consider whether, in the light of the international situation as it had developed by then, it might be regarded as necessary and possible to authorise defence programmes of a wider scope and involving greater expenditure than he now suggested.

Whatever may be said in criticism of these proposals as delaying tactics, Inskip himself in no way denied that this was what he was actually engaged in. He argued that, so far as 1938 and 1939 were concerned, plans drawn up by the Departments on the basis of his suggested figures would probably represent as much work as could be carried out—i.e. given the current industrial and manpower resources—in the years in question. The next two years, 1940 and 1941 would be different. By then the figure representing the highest possible apportionment in favour of any one of the Departments was certain, unless the international situation improved, to fall short of what was necessary to preserve the measure of protection recommended by that Department's expert advisers. He then went on:

'I can find no solution of the problem thus presented. The forecasts of necessary expenditure . . . however they may be manipulated, cannot be made to fit our financial circumstances. The plain fact which cannot be obscured is that it is beyond the resources of this country to make proper provision in peace for defence of the British Empire against three major Powers in three different theatres of war. If the test should come, I have confidence in the power and inherent capacity of our race to prevail in the end. But the burden in peace-time of taking the steps which we are advised—I believe rightly—are prudent and indeed necessary in present circumstances, is too great for us. I therefore repeat with fresh emphasis the opinion which I have already expressed as to the importance of reducing the scale of our commitments and the number of our potential enemies.'⁽²⁴⁾

His analysis and recommendations were discussed at length by the Cabinet at two meetings on 16th February 1938. Particular points were criticised by individual Ministers.* Both the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Duff Cooper, questioned the propriety of setting a financial limit and then

* Criticisms of individual Service programmes will be examined in later chapters.

tailoring the defence programmes to fit. They argued both that other nations, among them potential enemies, did not count the cost of vast armaments and that Britain herself would arm regardless of cost if and when war began. Whether it was advisable to adopt a different approach during peace was questionable. Others pointed out that the Minister's view was based on the worst possible situation, namely that of Britain on her own opposed to three major Powers as enemies. Both the First Lord of the Admiralty and the Secretary of State for Air claimed, what was literally true, that the Chiefs of Staff, whatever their fears, had never yet based their arrangements explicitly on the assumption of the hostility of three Powers simultaneously. And it was further argued that even if the worst fears were borne out then, almost by definition, France could be counted upon as an ally. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, provided a variation on this theme when he argued that Britain's differences with Germany, Italy and Japan were fundamental ones and that this reduced the possibilities of manoeuvre to somewhat narrow limits. He did not so much assume that some other countries would be allies as that Britain should deliberately court her friends and find out what they could do to assist her.

But, on the whole, the Cabinet stood firmly behind the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. And the big guns were brought to bear in his support against the two lines of argument first mentioned. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, denied that the Treasury was acting in any narrow Departmental sense in its fight to limit expenditure on defence. He reminded his colleagues once again of the great and rapid increase in defence expenditure in recent years and warned them that, in his view and that of his advisers, the expenditure of £1,650 million on defence (a sum he now agreed was necessary) not only placed a terrible strain on the national finances, but that it could not be increased without financial disorganisation to an extent that would weaken the resistance of the country. In the matter of the number of enemies likely to be ranged against Britain in a future war the Prime Minister did not so much deny the optimism of some Ministers as repeat the obvious conclusion from the argument that war on three fronts was indeed the worst assumption. He also repeated, what the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had already underlined, that these present proposals were to some extent an evasion and a postponement of decision. The Government might, in fact, be faced with a worse financial situation in two years time should the conditions of trade in any way deteriorate, and the prospect of heavier taxation then would be extremely difficult and unpleasant to face. He had, therefore, felt some doubt whether he was justified in accepting any degree of postponement, and he had brought himself to do this only by

his hope for an improvement in the international situation. In view of the many harsh criticisms which have been levelled against Mr. Chamberlain for his diplomatic activities in these years, it should be emphasised that he spoke in this particular debate with gravity and without any degree of optimism. Moreover, apart from the warning of Lord Halifax that Britain would find it virtually impossible to placate her enemies, no Minister openly disagreed with the Prime Minister that the alternatives which faced the country were either expense on a scale which carried its own dangers, or an improvement of relations with potential enemies however difficult it might be to find the proper compromise.

In the end the Cabinet accepted the recommendations of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence without material amendment. The total of defence expenditure in the quinquennium 1937-41 was to be raised to the new ceiling of £1,650 million, including provision for air raid precautions and other civil defence measures. This sum was to be allocated, after consultations between Ministers, to the Departments concerned and to be regarded, at any rate for the time being, as final for the period in question. And a further enquiry was to be undertaken in 1939.⁽²⁵⁾

How these decisions worked out in practice can be illustrated by looking briefly at the way in which they affected the Army, at this stage more severely dealt with than the other two Services. It will be remembered that the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had suggested, and the Cabinet had approved, a total defence spending of £1,570 million for the current quinquennium, of which the Army's share was to be £481 million. At about the same time that those figures were put forward the Army had asked for £576.4 million for the quinquennium, made up of £347 million for capital expenditure with the rest allocated to normal services;⁽²⁶⁾ moreover, between February and April the Cabinet had sanctioned—in the light of developments on the Continent—some acceleration and expansion of approved programmes, particularly for the Royal Air Force and anti-aircraft defence. The latter was the responsibility of the War Office. In other words, the Army was being asked to make very large cuts in its proposed expenditure and at a time when one of its major responsibilities was increasing.

In April 1938, Mr. Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War, came forward with new proposals tailored to fit, as closely as possible, his Department's new budget. He aimed at an overall saving of £70 million. Economies of this scale could hardly be achieved without reducing efficiency. The ammunition reserves of the 'colonial' type expeditionary force were reduced; a pool of war equipment designed for the Territorial Army in peace-time training, and for use in war if necessary, was eliminated; and there was a substantial reduction in

the numbers of gun equipments for air defence.* The Cabinet, having willed the end, accepted the means. At its meeting on 27th April 1938 it accepted the new proposals of the Secretary of State for War with eyes open to the risks involved. The only qualification was that if it should be found possible at any time to accelerate or increase the programme of anti-aircraft defences, then he should bring the matter to the attention of the Cabinet.⁽²⁷⁾

2. *Financial Limits and Treasury Control,
Munich to the Outbreak of War, October 1938 to September 1939*

The impact of the Munich crisis broke down not so much all forms of control as control exercised on the assumption of long-term planning on a fixed financial basis. In early October 1938, for example, the C.I.D. considered a number of intelligence reports on the German aircraft industry and, as a result, came to the conclusion 'that this country could not be regarded as safe until the Royal Air Force and the anti-aircraft defences have been increased, and our passive defence arrangements have been substantially improved.' The attention of the Cabinet was to be drawn to this state of affairs.⁽²⁸⁾ Three weeks later, on 26th October, the Cabinet itself went a stage further and set up a Committee under the chairmanship of Sir Thomas Inskip, 'to consider proposals for extending the scope of the Defence Programmes and measures designed to accelerate production.'⁽²⁹⁾ This Committee quickly got to work to consider proposals to accelerate defence programmes submitted by the Home Office as well as the Service Departments, and its recommendations were then largely approved by the Cabinet on 7th November. Among the items approved was that the number of anti-aircraft equipments at present authorised should be increased to the number specified in the 'Ideal Scheme' for 'the Defence of Great Britain', thus going back on the reductions made only in April of that same year.⁽³⁰⁾

What is interesting about this particular post-Munich development, and what also remained, broadly speaking, true of the increasing tempo of rearmament programmes throughout the remaining months of peace, was that there was no longer a continual effort on the part of the Treasury to set a ceiling for defence expenditure, nor were Departments asked to tailor their plans to strict overall financial limitations. Cases tended more often to be treated on their own merits. This, however, is not to say that the Chancellor of the Exchequer forsook his traditional rôle. Indeed, given the stronger awareness of the need to speed up rearmament measures which resulted from the Munich crisis, what is perhaps surprising is the

* See below, Chapter XII.

degree of control he still tried to exercise. For example, at its first meeting after Munich, on 6th October 1938 the Service and some other Departments were asked to draw up a review of precautions taken during the recent crisis, to point out defects in existing arrangements and to suggest remedies. In addition, the Air Ministry was asked to review the relative air strengths of Britain and some other countries and to recommend measures designed to improve Britain's own position.⁽³¹⁾ When he received the Air Ministry review,^{(32)*} the Chancellor pointed out that if the scheme now put forward in it was approved without reservation then the Air Ministry would spend, in the five years to April 1942, a sum exceeding by nearly £350 million the portion of the aggregate of £1,650 million allotted to it by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence only six months before. The Chancellor went on:

'The essential requirements of other services also, including A.R.P. have involved and are continuing to involve material additions to that aggregate figure. Moreover, the great additions to our burden now being asked for will have to be met, not over a period of five years, but rather within the three years 1939-40, 1940-41, and 1941-42.

Meanwhile the yield of revenue is sagging with the declining activity of the country as a whole.

The Air Ministry's programme is, therefore, so costly as to raise serious doubts whether it can be financed beyond 1939-40 without the gravest danger to the country's stability. The damage which I apprehend is not of the sort which can be got over by calling for "sacrifices"; it would consist in such a weakening of our economic and financial strength as no increase of taxation could remedy.

Excessive borrowing entails the risks of higher costs, higher wages and most certainly higher interest rates, so that the burden on the country, even if tolerable at first, becomes progressively worse. Moreover, it means substantially increased imports and substantially reduced exports. Our balance of payments—already a serious problem—will become more and more serious. In the end our monetary reserves (which have already been heavily depleted since the crisis by the withdrawal of foreign capital from this country) might be still more rapidly exhausted, and we should have lost the means of carrying on a long struggle altogether.

I do not for a moment claim that purely financial considerations can have priority over urgent and definite needs for material defence. The two things have to be considered together. The worst of all results would be to reach a position hereafter in

*See below, p. 583 ff.

which defence plans should be openly seen to have been frustrated by the financial and economic situation.'⁽³³⁾

Nonetheless the Chancellor was quite explicit that 'the moral he wished to point was that we should not place orders for more than we knew we should be able to afford when the day of reckoning came'.⁽³⁴⁾

When this matter came before the Cabinet on 7th November (that same meeting at which Ministers decided, after all, to provide all the A/A gun requirements specified in the 'Ideal' scheme) the Chancellor even in Air Force matters which had for so long received virtually top priority in Britain's defence preparations, had his way to some extent. The Cabinet accepted his recommendation that a sharp line should be drawn between the Air Ministry's fighter and bomber programmes. Full approval was given to the former. But, on the Chancellor's suggestion, approval was given simply for sufficient orders for bombers to avoid substantial dismissals in the aircraft factories concerned, and to maintain an adequate flow of production; and, in the case of any national factories designed for this work but as yet underemployed, sufficient orders to secure a normal complement of employment.⁽³⁵⁾

Nor was that the Chancellor's last fight. In January 1939 he found himself faced with Service Department estimates for that year which were, as he said, 'very much higher than any figure which we have hitherto contemplated for such estimates'. Moreover, there appeared certain to be an even larger demand for 1940. 'Large new additions to defence expenditure,' he complained, 'are still being proposed, almost daily.'⁽³⁶⁾ Sir John Simon therefore asked the Service Ministers both to make a close scrutiny of their estimates and to reduce them by the maximum amount possible. But at last the tide was moving against him, and the revolutionary change involved in the new concept of the rôle of the Army decided upon in the spring of the same year was bound to make all previous financial estimates completely out of date.

So far we have been concerned with control of the total allocation of money to single Service Departments and to the three of them taken together. This was the normal procedure for agreeing upon annual estimates adapted, during the last two or three years before the war, to somewhat unusual circumstances. In addition, and once these totals had been agreed, there was the further control exercised by the Treasury over a wide range of actual spending, by consultation between its own officials and those of the spending Departments. This, again, was normal procedure, except that it was reinforced by a separate committee, the Treasury Inter-Services Committee.*

* Henceforward referred to as T.I.S.C.

Moreover, this detailed check on spending, although modified to some extent in the year between Munich and the outbreak of war, still continued to operate substantially unchanged even then. Given the crisis conditions which faced all three Services in those twelve months, and the long discussions about total allocations which had already gone on throughout 1937 and well into 1938, it is hardly surprising that Service representatives sometimes found this further degree of Treasury control bitterly frustrating and, to men in a hurry, pointless.

Treasury control of this latter kind ranged from minor items to others of great importance or urgency. An example of the former occurred in July 1937 when three new Observer Corps Groups were sanctioned by the C.I.D. but only after the necessary expenditure had been authorised by the T.I.S.C.; the sums involved were an initial cost of £21,400 and an annual recurrent cost of £13,500.⁽³⁷⁾ On a very different scale was the Navy's request, in March of that same year, for anti-torpedo-boat defences for Singapore at an initial cost of £809,000 and £89,000 a year recurrent expenditure. When this matter was considered by the C.I.D. its Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, made it clear that 'approval by the Committee of Imperial Defence of proposals of this nature did not necessarily involve immediate action for the provision of the equipment. . . . The details of such provision would be settled in the normal way between the Service Departments concerned and the Treasury.'⁽³⁸⁾ An even more interesting example occurred in March 1938 during a C.I.D. discussion of the details of the Chiefs of Staff major appreciation on the Mediterranean and Middle East.⁽³⁹⁾ The Chiefs of Staff had recommended, in view of what was thought to be the increasing danger of an Italian attack on Egypt, that reinforcements, including one infantry brigade and ancillary troops, should be sent to Palestine as a reserve. At the C.I.D. meeting the Secretary of State for War reported that, although the Cabinet had agreed that these reinforcements should be sent out as soon as possible, the T.I.S.C. had questioned the wisdom of such action because of the situation in Europe, specifically German action in Austria. The Secretary of State complained that the War Office programme had been 'held up'. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, supported the action of the T.I.S.C. on the ground that temporary huts would have to be built to accommodate the reinforcements at a cost of £300,000, and that it was proper for the T.I.S.C. to question such expenditure if the troops destined to use the huts were likely to be recalled to England.

Treasury control exercised in this way was no less frequent after Munich than it had been beforehand and occurred in matters of similar importance. At its meeting on 7th November 1938 the Cabinet considered detailed plans for accelerating the programmes

of all three Services and sanctioned a wide range of actions to be taken. Sixteen of the items were, however, agreed to subject to consultation with the Treasury, either directly or through the T.I.S.C. These included the provision of new minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels, the defensive arming of large liners and merchant ships, the ordering of 2,200 tons of armour plate for the Navy, the provision of anti-aircraft equipment for the Army, and the ordering of new aircraft, for example for overseas squadrons, for the Royal Air Force.⁽⁴⁰⁾

In the early new year there was further consideration of one of these items, the provision of more anti-aircraft equipment for the Army. At a meeting of the C.I.D. on 19th January the Secretary of State for War, Mr. Hore-Belisha, reported that at a meeting of the T.I.S.C. the previous day there had been some objection to ordering 360 A/A guns on the ground that the latter committee was uncertain whether prior Cabinet approval had or had not been given. The Secretary of State claimed that Cabinet approval had in fact been given (he quoted from the relevant Cabinet minutes), that it was his impression that the Government was now anxious to complete the 'Ideal' scheme for the air defence of Britain as soon as possible, and that his own actions in this matter were now being delayed against his own wishes. Treasury replies to this criticism were conflicting. The Chancellor doubted whether there had been any delay and was not sure why this particular item had come up for discussion anyway. Sir Alan Barlow, the Treasury Under-Secretary, did not deny the delay and explained that the T.I.S.C. had assumed that there ought to be some formal reference to the Chancellor first. The C.I.D. politely refrained from recording a conclusion except that two more of its members emphasised the urgency of the matter.⁽⁴¹⁾

On 3rd March the C.I.D. discussed a matter of comparable importance. The Army was due to provide certain signal and administrative units for service with the Advanced Air Striking Force if and when the latter was despatched overseas. During the crisis of September 1938 the men for these units had been 'scraped together' from 3rd and 4th Divisions. Now that the Government was planning a major continental rôle for the Field Force, however, the men for the Army units to go with the Striking Force would have to be raised separately and would be an extra charge on Army funds. In these circumstances the Treasury had decided that the matter must first be examined by the T.I.S.C. before any decision was taken; it was possible that the item for contingencies might cover the extra expenditure involved but that decision must be reserved for the time being.⁽⁴²⁾ The C.I.D. itself agreed that extra men, at additional cost, must be found; but the reference to the Treasury remained.

It has been suggested that Treasury scrutiny of the sort described here did not unduly delay action during the last year or two before the war; that in important matters decisions were taken quickly even if there were sometimes unnecessary delays lower down the scale.⁽⁴³⁾ This may have been so, but the items mentioned here do indicate delays in urgent decisions and, at any rate, some degree of confusion in the process.

3. *Production and Labour Limits: 'Business as Usual'*

What has been said in the previous section is not intended to imply that the Chamberlain administration was more niggardly than its predecessor in matters of defence. There is no reason to think that Baldwin would have acted with greater urgency had he stayed in office. Nor, most probably, would any other ministers have done so, with the exception of Eden or Duff Cooper or, had he been given the chance, Winston Churchill. But this is idle speculation for no one of these three had the authority to command in the Cabinet and in Parliament in May 1937. Moreover, to be fair to Chamberlain and his colleagues it should be remembered that at the very time when financial control was being more firmly applied to the rearmament programmes, other forms of control were being removed. The original deficiency and later expansion programmes would have been difficult enough to complete even had it been possible to devote a major industrial effort to them. In fact, these programmes were superimposed on the after-effects of a serious depression and, from the beginning, the Government's policy was to try to satisfy defence requirements without interfering with expanding production for civilian purposes and particularly for the export trade. However much this limitation complicated the problem of rearmament, it was argued that interference with normal business methods would adversely affect general prosperity and so reduce the country's ability to find the necessary funds for the defence programmes. Here was another aspect of the general argument that financial and economic stability, and the international reputation that goes with it, was the 'fourth arm of defence'. On at least two occasions in 1936, both of them during debates on the setting up of a Ministry of Supply armed with compulsory powers, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence made this policy plain to the House of Commons.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The second statement, in November, 1936 was the more complete of the two. After describing the new supply organisation at the War Office, the Minister went on:

'I only desire to say this further on this question of the Ministry of Munitions: the House will realise that the financial strain

which is being placed upon this country is a stupendous one. If we were to interrupt and break down the process of the industry of peace-time, we should run the risk of destroying the financial fabric of the nation. It would be difficult to stop when once you had begun to turn this country into one vast munitions-producing camp. I agree that the responsibility upon the Government, and in a minor degree upon myself, is a very heavy one in deciding what the proper course is, but I believe that the House will be wise, taking the long view, to think that in the present conditions it is right to proceed as we are and to attempt as far as possible to satisfy the needs of the country without stopping that export trade upon which the financial position of this country depends. And remember that we depend upon the resources of finance for the successful fighting of a war as much as upon the production of munitions.⁷⁽⁴⁵⁾

This phase of 'business as usual', of interfering as little as possible with the normal industrial and commercial life of the country, lasted from the initiation of the first deficiency programme until the spring of 1938.

From the beginning it was realised that 'no interference with normal industry and trade' could not be regarded as an iron rule. At his first meeting with the Chiefs of Staff in March 1936, Sir Thomas Inskip, the newly appointed Minister, had asked to be kept regularly posted with news about the rearmament of Germany. He had reminded the Chiefs of Staff of the Cabinet's decision that the reconditioning of the Services was to be carried out, as far as possible, without interfering with normal trade. If, however, Germany rearmed with dangerous speed, it might be necessary to modify that Cabinet decision and to pass from a peace-time system of production to some form of war system.⁽⁴⁶⁾

It was not until the latter part of 1937, however, that official opinion began to crystallise against the policy of 'business as usual'. The period when the Services were reconsidering their programmes for the overall review of defence expenditure conducted by Inskip coincided with a visit of a leading German officer, General Milch, to Britain.* Towards the end of his visit General Milch admitted that the German air programme which, according to an earlier statement of his would be completed by the autumn of 1938, was already complete, though some squadrons were not fully equipped. Indeed in one particular, Army Co-operation squadrons, the programme had already been exceeded. The Air Staff, already anxious about the maintenance of 'parity', were naturally made even more so by these remarks. They were now asking for the implementa-

* i.e. in mid-October 1937. General Milch was the German State Secretary for Aviation and Inspector General of the Air Force.

tion of Scheme 'J', representing an increase of some 25 per cent upon Scheme 'F' to which they were already working.* In arguing the military need for the new programme the Air Staff emphasised the great difficulties of adjusting the present output capacity of aircraft and ancillary material to the needs of a new and enlarged programme, a process in which speed was of the first importance. On the current basis of output the production of the number of aircraft required to implement Scheme 'F' was not going to be secured until several months after the date (April 1939) which was contemplated when that scheme was first approved. It was of the utmost importance that, because of developments in Germany outlined by General Milch, the suggested new Scheme should be completed by the end of 1939 or as soon after as possible. To carry out such a programme, however, at the rate and on the scale which were being recommended, would necessitate that deliberate interference with normal business methods which Inskip had admitted might eventually become necessary. Indeed, the speed up of German plans was one part of the case for such interference.

'Further' the Air Staff argued, 'it is material to point out that productive capacity has a vital bearing on the question of our war potential generally. The replacement of losses and wastage can be effected for a certain period by drawing on stored reserves of aircraft and equipment, but the ability to sustain and to develop our war effort must depend in the long run on the speed with which factory output can catch up with the war demand. Moreover, a large productive capacity capable of even further expansion with the minimum of delay is a stronger asset, and probably far less expensive, than a large stored reserve of aircraft which may, when the time comes, be obsolescent. There is no doubt whatever that in this respect Germany is already far ahead of the United Kingdom in her preparations.'⁽⁴⁷⁾

In other words, the Air Staff recommended that, to enable the additional squadrons for Scheme 'J' (with their appropriate scales of reserves of men and material) to be provided at the earliest possible date, the policy of business as usual, at present limiting the productive capacity of industry available for rearmament should be reconsidered.

These proposals were somewhat modified by the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Swinton, when he passed them on to the Defence Plans (Policy) Committee of the C.I.D. He in no way contested the basic assumptions of his professional advisers either as to the nature of the threat from Germany or the proper response to it. On the question

* See below, p. 565 ff.

of timing, however, he said that the best forecast he could give for the production of the full number of aircraft, including reserves, for the Metropolitan side of this programme, was the summer of 1941, though warning his colleagues how difficult it was to forecast production with certainty when regard was paid to the accumulating and conflicting claims of rearmament programmes and civil industry on labour and materials alike. But, unlike his professional advisers, the Minister—for all the seriousness of his warnings—did not urge any change of policy with regard to industry as a whole. Indeed, he expressly stated that the timing estimate he was making was based 'on the assumption that it will remain the policy of the Government to avoid the control of industry and interference with normal production to meet civil requirements'.

In fairness to Lord Swinton one further point should be mentioned. He argued that even if the Government were prepared to control or use other means to compel a large-scale diversion of civil factories to armament work and so effect a speed-up in munitions production, the existing voluntary system of Service recruiting could not keep pace with such an accelerated programme. There was little difficulty on the score of recruitment for pilots. On the other hand, if trade remained good there would probably be great difficulty in recruiting the necessary numbers of skilled maintenance men, while the recruitment of apprentices would present increasing difficulties owing to industrial competition. The same sort of limitation applied also to the recruitment of unskilled men.⁽⁴⁸⁾

This particular labour problem, as one aspect of 'business as usual', had already been noted more than two years before. During the discussions which preceded the air expansion programme of May 1935* the Chief of the Air Staff had pointed out that any such expansion demanded large numbers of fitters in addition to those already in the R.A.F., and that it was not easy for the Air Ministry to compete in the open market for labour of that kind.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Towards the end of November 1937 the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, wrote for his colleagues a brief but forceful memorandum on the proposals of the Air Staff for the new Scheme 'J'. His purpose was to persuade Ministers of what he himself considered to be the proper relationship between military strength and foreign policy in this particular context. Estimates of the increasing speed of German rearmament in the air and Britain's laggardliness in this respect filled him, he wrote, 'with grave apprehension'. It looked as though we were already two years behind Germany. Scheme 'J', which the Air Staff recommended ought, so they also recommended, to be completed as nearly as possible *pari passu* with the German programme.

* See above, Chapter V, Section 4.

In fact, the Secretary of State for Air had argued that, given no direct control of production or of manpower for recruitment to the R.A.F., the programme could not be completed until 1941, by which time the Germans would almost certainly have augmented their current programme or, at any rate, have fully completed it a good deal more than two years ahead of the British counterpart. 'The grave situation revealed in the paper before us', wrote Mr. Eden, 'is one with which, in its general outlines, we have for a long time been only too familiar. . . . But it is alarming to find, with every new report we receive, that the day of security never comes any nearer, but is successively postponed to a still more distant future'. Foreign policy, he argued, should be looked upon as operating in conjunction with, and not in substitution for military strength. If Britain's safety had been ensured so far, and if the position in Europe had not suffered any catastrophic disturbance, this could probably be attributed to German military unreadiness and economic and financial weakness on the one hand and, on the other, to Britain's prestige, the mere announcement of the rearmament programme and to the closeness of the Anglo-French connection. But some of these were wasting assets. If Britain was too obviously out-stripped in the race for military strength, the forces of diplomacy, however prudently and resourcefully used, could not be relied upon to guarantee safety except at the cost of deep national humiliation. And this was all the more true now that the three great expansionist Powers had succeeded, under cover of the anti-Comintern Pact, in setting up a system of mutual support which could, if and when needed, be equally well directed against Britain's interests. Mr. Eden went on:

'Whatever our foreign policy may be, and whatever our relations with Germany may be, now and in the future, it should be an immutable principle with us that we ought not to be satisfied until we have seen to it "that in air strength and air power this country shall no longer be in a position of inferiority to any country within striking distance of our shores". Only by so doing can we be reasonably secure in a world which is becoming more and more dangerous, not only to our security but also to the ideals and ways of life which we cherish; and only by so doing can we hope to negotiate "settlements" on terms of equality with either Germany or Italy so as to prevent Europe from falling into that general war which might be our undoing.

If it is established that we cannot hope to provide ourselves with what the Air Staff consider to be our minimum requirements in the matter of air armaments and air defence before the summer of 1941, without some modifications of our present industrial policy and even of our system of voluntary recruitment, I would urge that the possibility of making some such modification should be earnestly studied, or, failing this, that

our material requirements should be met by purchases from abroad. The situation is one which calls for a special endeavour to mobilise our abundant national energies. It is becoming more and more doubtful whether we shall be able by diplomatic means to continue to meet the potential challenge to our security and our international position by ambitious nations organised for immediate and total war and prepared to act in conjunction with each other, unless we make some more deliberate and conscious national effort than that upon which we are at present engaged.'⁽⁵⁰⁾

It is clear that these views were, by now, not by any means confined to Mr. Eden. At a Chiefs of Staff Committee meeting just before Christmas 1937 it appears that the Chief of Naval Staff, Lord Chatfield, had made some highly critical remarks on the general state of Imperial defence to his colleagues.⁽⁵¹⁾ These remarks, as he subsequently pointed out, were not really intended for the record but simply for general reflection by members of the committee. The remarks were subsequently cut out of the formal draft of the minutes of the meeting. Before that happened an original draft, including the remarks in question, had been circulated, one copy going to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. The latter promptly wrote to Lord Chatfield expressing some perturbation at the draft minutes he had read (he had not been present at the meeting) and emphasising that the financial sinews of war were so important that it was difficult to increase our rate of war production if peacetime industry was to be adequately sustained. Remarking, somewhat irreverently that 'the answer to that is, of course, that the richer we are when a war starts the bigger the indemnity that will be demanded of us if we lost it!', the First Sea Lord went on to put his case more fully in a letter to the Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Maurice Hankey:

'The situation as I see it is that three years ago we envisaged a steady replacement to be completed at jumping periods, the shortest of which was 1939. When things became more critical we urged, and the Government accepted, greatly hastened steps. We accepted those steps as the most that could be done without over-disturbing industry or over-straining finance, but in doing so we reiterated, as we have done again recently, that we must get rid of some of our responsibilities. Unfortunately, not only have the potential enemies remained but one of them—Germany—is becoming rapidly stronger. The second one—Italy—is becoming more mischievous and more virulent, and the third one—Japan—is actively engaged in trying to destroy one of our friends, *believing* that we are relatively helpless.

It therefore seems to me that the time has come to consider

our position once more. I do not of course know, though I am endeavouring to find out, whether if the Chiefs of Staff asked for more to be done it *could* be done. It may be that whatever we try to do to reduce those long distant dates running up to 1942 and later cannot be achieved. What I want to find out is, is it possible and what does it involve.'⁽⁵²⁾

A week later, on 14th January, Sir Maurice Hankey wrote in much the same sense to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. The country had reached the position against which the Government had been warned by the D.R.C. in 1935 and by the Chiefs of Staff at frequent intervals afterwards, in which Germany, Italy and Japan had come together as a combined menace to Britain and the Empire. Either Britain must change her foreign policy in an attempt to make friends with one or more of these potential enemies, or the tempo of her rearmament must be increased by dropping the principle that peace-time trade and industry were not to be interfered with.⁽⁵³⁾

Early in February 1938 the Chiefs of Staff Committee took this matter a stage further.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Already in November 1937 they had thought it their duty to warn the C.I.D. of the continuing dangers of Britain's military position and, to support their view, had given details showing the comparison of the strength of Great Britain with that of some other countries as at January 1938. In their concluding remarks to this earlier memorandum the Chiefs of Staff had emphasised the inadequacy of Britain's forces to meet her defensive commitments from western Europe through the Mediterranean to the Far East, and had reminded Ministers of the increasing probability that a war started in any of these three areas might extend to one or both of the other two. Their conclusion then had been that it was impossible to exaggerate the importance of political action which would reduce the number of the country's potential enemies and gain the support of potential allies.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Returning to the same subject of the dangers of Britain's military position in February 1938 the Chiefs of Staff developed another line of argument. Disclaiming any wish to be alarmist or any intention of interference beyond their proper responsibilities, they pointed out that the political situation had not improved and showed no sign of improving, and that the Empire was now faced with a military situation 'fraught with greater risk than at any time in living memory, apart from the war years'. If diplomacy was finding it difficult, if not impossible, to provide a solution, was there any other hopeful line of advance? What the Chiefs of Staff now recommended was that the Government should take powers to control industry and manpower sufficiently to bring current programmes up-to-date, and, if necessary, to implement even larger programmes if that was what the situation demanded.

'We fully recognise', they said, 'that under the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence everything possible is being done that can be done without further disturbing industry, and we do not in any way wish to minimise the enormous efforts that are being made in every Department of State and in the country as a whole. Nevertheless, we are attempting to carry out an armament programme, on a scale never yet attempted except in war, in peace conditions, and subject to a policy of non-interference with normal trade which cannot fail to be a serious handicap when we are competing with potential enemies whose whole financial, social and industrial system has, in effect, been mobilised on a war footing for at least three years . . . What we desire to do in this paper is to call the attention of the Committee of Imperial Defence to the fact that our approved rearmament programme is falling behind and that in our opinion it will fail to give us security in time.'

The Chiefs of Staff then described in some detail how even the existing programmes were falling behind schedule. For example, so far as the Army was concerned, a lack of skilled labour, together with a shortage of supplies of steel, had already caused serious delays. Arrangements had recently been made with the Iron and Steel Federation which, in practice, gave priority to Service needs. But, even so, the situation was serious enough. The Chiefs of Staff estimated that, by April 1939, deliveries of major items of equipment would, on the basis of the approved programme, be deficient as follows:

| Table 5 | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Sample Estimated Deficiencies in Production of Guns for the Army, April 1939 | |
| | <i>Deficient per cent</i> |
| 3·7-inch and 4·5-inch A/A equipments | 35 |
| 3·7-inch and 4·5-inch shell bodies | 20 |
| Tanks and machine gun carriers (all types) | 45 |
| Tank and anti-tank guns | 60 |
| Anti-tank rifles | 20 ⁽⁵⁶⁾ |

This forecast should not have surprised those to whom it was addressed. Six months earlier the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had explained—also to the D.P.(P.)C. whom the Chiefs of Staff were now addressing—that, out of a total of £81 million for the completion of the Army deficiency programme, orders to the extent of only £35 million had so far been placed, and that this was because the placing of the full orders authorised would cause undue

interference with normal industrial production. 'The Director-General of Munitions Production had, therefore, placed only a limited amount of orders in accordance with the Government's policy that industry should not be interfered with, and in order to use the plant and labour in the most economical fashion'.⁽⁵⁷⁾

The Chiefs of Staff, in their memorandum of February 1938, pointed out that what was true of the Army was true, also, of the other two services. From a mere comparison of paper strengths they considered it doubtful whether France could deal unassisted with the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean during the whole of 1939 and 1940. Even less was she likely to be able to safeguard British interests as well as her own in that sea. But supposing the opposite were true; that would still leave Britain to deal virtually on her own with Germany and Japan. Again, exact comparison of battleship strengths presented difficulties; but it certainly had to be remembered that all Japan's capital ships had been modernised recently and all German capital ships were of new construction. Throughout the dangerous years 1938-41, when Britain's current programme would give her a bare margin of superiority in serviceable capital ships over Germany and Japan, five of her capital ships would remain unmodernised and three only partially modernised. The only means of reducing the risks of these years would be to accelerate the building of five already approved new capital ships and the modernising of the three old ships now in hand, by departing from normal methods of working. The view of the technical officers responsible for these matters was that, in all the more important matters of capital ship work where bottlenecks existed and affected the final date of completion*, night shifts ought to be worked immediately. This would involve more skilled labour.

The same sort of problems bedevilled production for the Royal Air Force. The Chiefs of Staff included in their paper details of the discrepancy between requirements and anticipated deliveries of aircraft by 1st April 1939.⁽⁵⁸⁾ They stated they were informed that the aircraft industry was at present working on the basis of one shift per day, with a certain amount of overtime; that production could now be greatly accelerated by putting a number of the more important factories on to a double-shift basis, if the skilled men were available; that speed-up would mean a net gain in production of something over 33 per cent, which would begin to accrue in the third month after its institution. But, again, the problem was how to get the skilled men in the open market. The Chiefs of Staff were in no doubt about the conclusions to be drawn from the survey.

* e.g. particularly heavy guns, munitions and engines.

'In the preceding paragraphs', they wrote, 'we have referred only to our own defence programmes. We would, however, point out that, at the present rate of production it is unsafe to accept the armament orders which our Dominions, Allies and other Foreign countries desire to place with us, since this can only be done at the expense of our own requirements and thus of a still further delay in the completion of our programmes. The alternative of refusing these orders has political, military and, ultimately, economic reactions, which it is unnecessary to emphasise.

The conclusion which we reach is that an immediate acceleration in production is essential to our security. As we have already mentioned, the principal bottle-neck at the present time is the lack of skilled labour. We are informed, for example, that Vickers Limited are working at only two-thirds capacity for this reason, and that the new factory at Scotswood has in sight approximately 70 skilled men against a total of 522 to obtain full capacity. Consequently the solution of our difficulties would seem to lie not so much in creating new capacity for production, but in working existing plants to their fullest possible capacity. This can be done only by the adoption of measures which will ensure that munitions firms can be provided with a sufficient reinforcement of skilled labour withdrawn from work not connected with the rearmament programme.'⁽⁵⁹⁾

Of interest, because of its detail, is a letter dated 19th February 1938, from the Chairman of Vickers-Armstrongs to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence.⁽⁶⁰⁾ In this connection it should be remembered that Vickers-Armstrongs had been able to retain relatively more specialised labour than most firms because of their, to some extent, privileged position. For example, by an agreement made in 1923 the Admiralty had promised not to place orders for gun-mountings with any other firm; Vickers were fully equipped for making gun-mountings of all kinds, having modernised their equipment. They also undertook all design and development work for the Admiralty. In fact, not until 1936 was the privileged position changed; by then it was already evident that Vickers could not undertake all the work that was necessary. Evidence from Vickers-Armstrong is, nonetheless, of a kind to be taken as representative of the rearmament business as a whole in this period.

The letter from Sir Charles Craven to Sir Thomas Inskip runs as follows:

'When you asked me on Friday whether my own Company and the other Engineering Firms in the country were working at full capacity on the rearmament programme, you will remember that I told you of the difficulties today in getting sufficient really skilled men, and of the still further difficulties that would

arise when all our extensions of plant and machinery had been completed.

Quite frankly the position is that Vickers-Armstrongs are getting behindhand in most of their Armament products and I believe that the only real reason for this, where plant has already been installed, is because of the difficulty of manpower. We have done a great deal in increasing our personnel, as is shown by the fact that in July 1936 Vickers-Armstrongs and its subsidiary Companies, including English Steel Corporation and the Aviation Companies, employed a total of 46,928 men and women, whereas the corresponding figures in October 1937 was 63,768. Today the situation has not materially altered. Included in these numbers are 5,025 indentured apprentices to the skilled trades and 2,317 young men who are being trained as machinists.

I cannot see any hope in the near future of greatly increasing the skilled men, who are really the key to the whole situation, in view of the relative prosperity of the general Engineering Industry of the Country. At present we are endeavouring to carry out a very intensified armament programme without interfering with the internal or external trade of the Country. If there had been a slump in ordinary trade our problem would have been an easy one, but of course the rearmament programme was superimposed on an Industry which was more prosperous than it had been since the War.

My latest return from all our Works and Companies shows that in order to man our existing plant we require 3,333 skilled and semi-skilled men and 1,052 unskilled men and women now. This is bad enough but when all our machines are delivered we shall require a still further 4,325 skilled and semi-skilled men and 4,458 unskilled men and women. These requirements are based generally on working two shifts, but in certain cases it has been assumed that three shifts are really necessary.

You will remember that we discussed briefly dilution of skilled labour as a possible means of overcoming the difficulty. While we never use the word "dilution" today because of the difficulties associated with it during the War, a tremendous amount has been done in de-skilling work so that the machine operated by a semi-skilled man can take the place very largely of the skilled engineer.

So far the Trade Unions have generally accepted the position and have not raised serious obstacles to this de-skilling operation, but they have made it clear that they are opposed to any form of real dilution.

I have confidentially discussed the situation with Ramsay, the Director of the Engineering Federation, of which I am President. I thought perhaps if the Prime Minister or you were to write to me, as President, a very strongly worded letter, I might be able to persuade the Federated Engineering Firms to release a small

proportion of their skilled men to the Armament Firms as a temporary measure, but of course we are faced at once with the difficulty of transferring these men by persuasion, which means by paying lodging allowances, etc., which would probably react at once on our other work people who have come from other districts and are already working for us.

To sum up the position, certain Firms and Industries are endeavouring today to carry out a war production without any of the powers behind them which War would give. I believe myself that the increase of production has been very remarkable but I understand from you that it is not anything approaching the production required. . . .

I only wish I could be a little more optimistic.'

The 1938 Statement Relating to Defence reflected the sense of urgency which had inspired the Chiefs of Staff memorandum. Regarding the rearmament programme as a whole the Government claimed it could be said ' . . . that, while delays and difficulties have been experienced, and deliveries have not, in some cases, come up to anticipation, progress has on the whole been satisfactory. The difficulties hitherto encountered have been largely met and the rate of production is now rapidly increasing'.⁽⁶¹⁾ On the other hand, it was admitted that ' . . . the full expansion of production necessary to enable the programmes to be completed within the time originally contemplated has made demands on the supply of certain materials and on certain types of skilled labour which could not be met without some delay, the more so as it has been the policy to avoid as far as possible interference with the requirements of private industry'. It is interesting to note that, when the Cabinet considered the draft of this Paper submitted by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, it substituted the words 'as far as possible' quoted above for the Minister's original word 'any'.⁽⁶²⁾ And Sir Thomas Inskip was a man who chose his words carefully.

This air of complacency, however much it may have been assumed in order to allay public anxiety, was soon to be dispelled. In March 1938 Hitler annexed Austria. The British Government immediately set itself to examine the nature of the consequent German military threat to Czechoslovakia and the possible counter-measures. The Prime Minister asked the Chiefs of Staff Committee to examine and report upon the implications, from a military point of view of:

- (a) concerted action between Great Britain and France, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Roumania, Hungary, Turkey, Greece, or any of them to resist by force any attempt by Germany to impose a forcible solution of the Czechoslovak problem; or

(b) an assurance from the United Kingdom to the French Government that, in the event of the French Government being compelled to fulfil their obligations to Czechoslovakia, consequent upon an act of aggression by Germany, the United Kingdom would at once lend its support to the French Government.

The views of the Chiefs of Staff on the military implications of the above alternative undertakings were pessimistic in the extreme. First, the United Kingdom's own rearmament programme was at a point where neither on land nor in the air could the nations' forces deal with the problem of a major war. The Royal Air Force, for example, was in the throes of expansion, could not operate in such a war for more than a few weeks, and the war production potential of the aircraft industry was incapable of replacing wastage for many months after the outbreak of war. Second, the value of the nations in south-east Europe whom an alliance with France would bring in, was at best problematical; indeed such allies might well, in the end, prove an embarrassment. Third, so far as France herself was concerned, the Chiefs of Staff argued that:

'If it were decided to give an assurance to France, an essential antecedent must be that we shall be informed of and approve the French plans, and, furthermore, that the full position with regard to her preparedness and the state of her industry are revealed. This precaution is essential, as France, in deciding her plans, may have counted on a degree of land and air support and of supplies from us, which is entirely unwarranted in the present state of our defence forces and of our armament production.'

The conclusion drawn was:

'... that no pressure that we and our possible allies can bring to bear, either by sea, on land or in the air, could prevent Germany from invading and over-running Bohemia and from inflicting a decisive defeat on the Czechoslovakian Army. We should then be faced with the necessity of undertaking a war against Germany for the purpose of restoring Czechoslovakia's lost integrity and this object would only be achieved by the defeat of Germany and as the outcome of a long struggle.

'... We feel bound to point out that the possibility that our association with allies, many of whom are of doubtful military value, against Germany might precipitate a definite military alliance between Germany, Italy and Japan, in place of the somewhat indefinite understanding that appears to exist.

This alliance would find us in the present year at a stage of rearmament when we are not yet ready for war. On the naval

side we are unfavourably placed with regard to comparative naval strength in capital ships, and our A/A rearmament measures are far from complete. The army has still a long way to go in the process of reorganisation and re-equipment. In the air, the expansion and re-equipment of the Air Force still falls far short of the stage at which it will be adequate for the protection of this country; while the incomplete state of our passive defence arrangements and of our A/A defences, both at home and throughout the Empire, are well known.⁷⁽⁶³⁾

Ministers discussed this and some associated papers at a Cabinet meeting on 22nd March. Although there was some disinclination to knuckle under to German methods, and although some Ministers argued that opposition now would keep Britain her friends and check her potential enemies, the view was increasingly accepted, as discussion went on, that Britain should refrain from any military guarantee but should, rather, endeavour to induce the Government of Czechoslovakia to apply themselves to producing a direct settlement on the Sudetenland, and that she should also persuade France to use her influence to bring about such a settlement. This was the view strongly advocated both by the Prime Minister and by the Foreign Secretary.*

On the other hand, the normal impersonal quality of the minutes fails to hide an underlying dissatisfaction with a situation in which Britain's inability to act was largely the result of her own weakness. The Prime Minister admitted that the first implication of his own advice was that Britain must speed up her existing plans for rearmament.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The Cabinet were informed that the investigations of the Secretary of State for Air had shown that some 70,000 additional workers would need to be provided for the aircraft industry by co-operation between industry and labour.† Further reinforcement

* This problem is referred to by Neville Chamberlain in a private letter to his sisters, dated 20th March 1938. He says that Winston Churchill's plan of a 'Grand Alliance' had already been thought of by himself, but that its attractiveness vanished once its practicability was examined. 'You have only to look at the map to see that nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia from being overrun by the Germans if they wanted to do it. . . . Therefore we could not help Czechoslovakia—she would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany. That we could not think of unless we had a reasonable prospect of being able to bend her to her knees in a reasonable time, and of that I see no sign. I have therefore abandoned any idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia or to France in connection with her obligations to that country.'

† Shortly before this the Secretary of State for Air had written for the Cabinet a memorandum on Scheme 'K', i.e. Scheme 'J' as amended in the light of financial restrictions. In this paper Lord Swinton urged that as much as possible of this programme should be completed during the next two years. He went on to propose, as a corollary, that sufficient labour of the right kind should be made available to enable all important factories working on the Air Ministry programme to work double shifts, where that was possible. This implied not merely increasing the personnel of factories engaged on aircraft engines, but also of those working on the whole range of armament, instruments and equipment.⁽⁶⁵⁾

would be required for engines and equipment. A survey of the position as to raw materials suggested that this would occasion no insuperable difficulties; indeed it was anticipated that, by the end of the year, capacity in material (extrusions, etc.) would be on a sufficient scale to provide for as many as 800 aeroplanes a month. Given the necessary labour, there was every hope, therefore, of a very considerable acceleration of production during the next year; this would not involve any alteration in present plans, the date of completion depending on the labour available in the factories.

At the end of this part of the discussion Ministers urged that, in framing a Parliamentary statement about the need to improve the country's defensive position, it should be made clear that the sole need was not labour, but that industry as a whole must be organised. And later in the meeting the Cabinet formally agreed that the assumption on which the reconditioning of the Services had so far been based, namely, that the course of normal trade was not to be interfered with, should now be cancelled.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Consequently, in a statement to the House of Commons on 24th March the Prime Minister announced the Government's intention of accelerating the rearmament programmes, especially those of the Royal Air Force and anti-aircraft defences. He stated that the Government had hoped to rearm the country without interfering with normal trade and production, and then added—

'We have now come to the conclusion that in the present circumstances acceleration of existing plans has become essential and, moreover, that there must be an increase in some parts of the programme. . . . In order to bring about the progress which we feel to be necessary, men and materials will be required, and rearmament work must have first priority in the nation's effort. The full and rapid equipment of the nation for self-defence must be its primary aim.'⁽⁶⁷⁾

The immediate outcome of this cancellation of the policy of 'business as usual' was the adoption of a new air expansion programme known as Scheme 'L'*. But war was only eighteen months away.

Summarising the effect of the restrictions on defence expenditure in the inter-war years and particularly down to 1935, the historian of Britain's war production claims that 'the Air Council and the Air Staff had . . . every reason for thinking that their Service was being starved out' and that, on the Army, 'the effects of the stringency were all but crippling.'⁽⁶⁸⁾ And, even when money began to be spent more lavishly, he still argues that, 'for at least three years after the first rearmament programmes these limits continued to circumscribe

* See below, Chapter XV, Section 3.

the supply of arms for the Forces as well as the preparation of industry for the production of munitions in time of war.'⁽⁶⁹⁾ Indeed, restrictions by no means completely disappeared then. Some remained until the outbreak of war and as late as the tragic events of the summer of 1940.

There can be no serious disagreement with these comments. The story outlined in this chapter for the progress of rearmament as a whole, and as it will be told in the following chapters for each of the three Services separately, amply supports Professor Postan's strictures. It is not the purpose of this book to examine the correctness of the economic theory, or at any rate implicit assumptions, on which these restrictions were based. But it is worthwhile to examine briefly whether Britain's unreadiness for a major war in September 1939 (and that she was unready in some vitally important respects is taken for granted here although it will be examined in more detail later) was due to these factors alone, or whether there were others—even if of less importance—which should also be taken into account. In particular, was Treasury control—so often singled out for blame by military men at that time and since—the real culprit?

In trying to assess the contribution of Treasury control to Britain's unreadiness in September 1939 for a major war which had long been foreseen, one general consideration should be borne in mind. During the period described in this volume the Chancellor and his Department were simply carrying out their normal constitutional duties; and neither in the House of Commons nor in the Cabinet was any serious suggestion made that the established procedures of Departmental estimates agreed with the Treasury, passed by the Estimates Committee and then voted on in the House of Commons, should be altered. Changes of that magnitude came only after the outbreak of war.⁽⁷⁰⁾ And what was true of procedures in dealing with overall estimates was equally true of Treasury scrutiny, whether by the T.I.S.C. or otherwise, of detailed Departmental spending. Changes in the structure of financial control could have come only from proposals to the House by the Government—not from any independent action by the Chancellor himself.

There were undoubtedly some changes in these matters in pre-war years which tended to strengthen Treasury control; but these were due to Government policy. First, the attempt to plan spending by the Service Departments, both individually and together, over a period of five years and sometimes more. Such long-term planning had been involved in the two reports of the D.R.C. and in the programmes authorised by the Cabinet on the basis of those reports; it became much more comprehensive in the major review of the cost of rearmament carried out in 1937-38. This new approach was undoubtedly to some extent Treasury inspired and, in 1937-38,

extended the degree of Treasury control. But it was also of some advantage to the Services, whatever the restrictions imposed upon them, to be able to plan their own spending in this way.*

The second change was the attempt not only to settle financial allocations over a period of years but also to settle strategic priorities in a similar way. This, too, had been to some extent involved in the two D.R.C. reports and in the decisions based on them. But it was also an approach made much more specific during the period of the 1937-38 financial review and was now the responsibility of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence in consultation with the Chiefs of Staff and working through the machinery of the C.I.D. The wish to give strategic planning a greater measure of coherence and effectiveness was one of the reasons for appointing such a Minister in the first place; and many of those who—both within and outside Parliament—urged such an appointment on the Government were certainly not concerned to strengthen Treasury control. As it happened, however, Sir Thomas Inskip fully accepted the Treasury's arguments about economic and financial stability as the fourth arm of defence and then proceeded to work out his strategic priorities on that basis, thus strengthening the Treasury's position in the critical period down to Munich. Whether anybody else in his position could have done otherwise is impossible to say. What is clear is that Sir Thomas Inskip was strongly supported by the majority of Ministers and it is at least open to question whether another man could successfully have adopted a different approach. Lord Chatfield, Sir Thomas Inskip's successor from February 1939, had by then too little room for manoeuvre and too little time before war broke out to initiate new policies.

It would be wrong, however, to stop at this point and to assume that all would have been well in the early years of the war had there been no Treasury control, whether of a general or detailed kind, before war began. To argue in that way would be to diagnose a complicated disease by considering only one of its many symptoms. There were, for example, production problems of labour and materials during these years which could not all have been solved simply by providing more money from 1933 onwards. Armaments firms, shipyards among them, had lost precious skilled labour in the lean years after 1919 and the gap could not be quickly filled in the 1930's. With a different economic philosophy, not 'business as usual' but 'business for war', no doubt much more could have been done. But the Government was not the only block here. Talk of direction and dilution of labour made a harsh sound, and understandably so, in the ears of trade unions disillusioned by long years of unemployment.

* See below, Chapter IX, Section 4, for the Navy's insistence that planning on a year to year basis was unsatisfactory.

This is not to imply that the unions or the Labour Party positively refused to respond to claims made upon them. But both Government and unions were reluctant to face issues of this kind until actual war made continued avoidance of them impossible.*

Again, the problems of the Navy after 1936 arose to a considerable extent from the restrictions of earlier naval treaties, which had nothing directly to do with Treasury control. What was needed for a two-power standard could not, in any case, have been achieved between the termination of the treaties and the outbreak of war, nor did the Admiralty ever claim that it could. And restrictions due to a policy of disarmament did not apply to the Navy alone. In justifying new plans put forward in the Statement Relating to Defence of March 1936 it was claimed that 'successive Governments have deliberately taken the course of postponing defence expenditure which would certainly have been justified and might indeed have been regarded as necessary, in order to give the best possible opportunity for the development of a new international order in which such expenditure might be avoided.'⁽⁷¹⁾ It would be cynically unfair both to blame Governments in the nineteen-thirties for dilatoriness in defence and, at the same time, to refuse to recognise the honesty of their purposes at the Geneva Disarmament Conference.

The Royal Air Force, also, faced a problem of time which was to some extent independent of money. The new generation of aircraft to which the Air Staff so wisely pinned their faith was, as far as fighters were concerned, only just coming into service at the time of Munich, while the big new bombers were scheduled for much later. Indeed, the Cabinet was only told of the new bomber programme in detail for the first time after Munich.† Moreover, in his long memorandum in which these details were explained, the Secretary of State for Air admitted to his Ministerial colleagues that it would not be possible to replace older and interim types in the bomber force with the new generation of aircraft until the summer of 1941 and, even then, with less than adequate reserves.⁽⁷²⁾ This was not, primarily, a financial problem. Technical developments in engines, airframes and both defensive and offensive equipment which made these new aircraft possible, were subject to their own laws; money could not necessarily inspire invention nor, beyond a certain point, speed up the lag between the first appearance of a new aircraft on the drawing board and its entry into squadron service.

Finally, the desperate unpreparedness of the Army—in some respects—in September 1939, was just as much the result of a general

* For some details of labour difficulties as they affected R.A.F. programmes, see below, pp. 581-82.

† See below, p. 587.

reluctance to face again the horrors of trench warfare as to find the money for an army equipped and of a size to fight a major continental campaign. It was convenient, as well as to some extent valid, to justify that reluctance on financial grounds. It was convenient, though much less justified, to obscure Britain's strategic involvement with the Continent by playing on the emotions which were, understandably, part of the aftermath of the First World War. But whatever the blindness and its causes, is it seriously to be supposed that, even with unlimited money, Governments or public would have engaged in preparations for a large modern army in 1937-38, let alone four or five years before?

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| (19) Cab. Cons. 48(37) and 49(37), pp. 17-21. There are interesting comments on this sort of basis of possible negotiation between Britain and Germany in letters from Chamberlain to his sisters dated 21st and 26th November 1937, and 5th and 12th December 1937 | 288 |
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- (29) Cab. Cons. 50(38), p. 17 296
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| (71) Cmd. 5107, p. 4 | 318 |
| (72) C.P. 218(38), para. 51. In the end this proved, not surprisingly, to be an optimistic forecast | 318 |

PART III
CHAPTER IX
NAVAL REARMAMENT, 1935-39⁽¹⁾

1. *The London Naval Conference, 1935-36*

THE REARMAMENT as distinct from the deficiency phase of naval policy begins with the last chapter of an earlier story. The policy of limitation by international agreement was one to which the naval staff had been driven after the First World War by political factors, in particular the popular—if often un-specific—clamour for disarmament, and the equally popular reluctance to spend money on arms of any kind. We have already seen how the Washington and London naval treaties of 1922 and 1930 reflected these joint pressures.

In preparing for international naval conferences the British Naval Staff were guided by some firm principles. It was, in general, considered that qualitative requirements were relative in all classes of fighting ships, and that there was some advantage in limiting these by international agreement. Indeed, without such agreements it would have been virtually impossible for Britain to build enough ships of adequate quality to protect the imperial trade routes and to provide operational flexibility. Quantitative requirements, on the other hand, while relative in ships composing the battle-fleets—and this had been long recognised in, for example, the Two-Power Standard—were considered absolute for ships for trade protection; in this latter case, requirements depended rather on the number of convoys to be protected and the length of routes to be policed than on the numbers of enemy commerce raiders. This view, again, had been made clear by the Admiralty in papers prepared for the Geneva and London Naval Conferences. Finally, if the policy of limitation by international agreement was not to harm Britain's interests it was regarded as vital that limitations should apply only to those classes of vessel in which her requirements were strictly relative, that disarmament agreements should enable her to build ships suitable to her particular purposes, and that such agreements, once made, should be binding on all other major naval powers.

In the three main naval conferences of the inter-war years, therefore, Britain's efforts were directed towards securing general acceptance of her own ideas regarding well balanced ships in the

numbers required to implement her naval strategy, while at the same time attempting to limit foreign fleets so that Britain would still possess a margin of superior strength when faced with any likely combination against her. In practice the chief difficulty was that this policy depended upon the voluntary assent of other powers whose naval interests were either different from or even potentially opposed to those of Britain herself. Compromise was inevitable if agreement of some sort was to be reached. The benefits to be secured by treaties of naval limitation were thus inevitably to some extent impaired by the need to make concessions to the interests of other Powers in order to secure the maximum number of signatories, and by the additional fact that, even when a degree of compromise was achieved, some Powers refused to sign the treaties or else signed and then subsequently denounced them.

These difficulties can be illustrated from the making of the London Naval Treaty of 1930.* The naval staff had long claimed that Britain's requirements in cruisers were absolute, not relative. In order to get an agreement in 1930, however, this claim was reluctantly forgone; on that occasion the cruiser tonnage to which Britain was entitled had been fixed solely in relation to the tonnage to be allowed to America and Japan. The dangerous implications of this sacrifice of an absolute standard of cruiser strength became evident when relations with Italy deteriorated unexpectedly and when Germany began to emerge again as a naval power outside treaty restrictions. In an attempt to solve this problem, at least in part, the expedient was adopted in 1934 of concentrating all cruiser tonnage on vessels for trade protection and of substituting large destroyers for the fleet cruisers which would have been built otherwise. Again, although capital ship limitation proved a straightforward and comparatively satisfactory matter as between Britain, America and Japan, the Royal Navy nevertheless suffered the disadvantage of being restricted in new capital ship construction at a time when Italy, France and Germany were, in practice, free. These last three Powers therefore gained some advantage in new capital shipbuilding which it would take Britain some years to overtake after the expiration of the treaty in 1936. Thirdly, the cruiser restrictions of 1930 did not result in the construction of cruisers of 7,000 to 8,000 tons which was the British ideal. The 10,000 ton limit remained in deference to American wishes, and soon the major naval powers were again building ships which approached this maximum displacement.

The second London Naval Treaty of 1936, and the prolonged negotiations which led up to it, should be seen in the light of these

* See above, Chapter I, Section 5.

considerations. Article XXIII of the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 stated that:

'The present Treaty shall remain in force until the 31st December 1936, and in case none of the Contracting Powers shall have given notice two years before that date of its intention to terminate the Treaty, it shall continue in force until the expiration of two years from the date on which notice of termination shall be given by one of the Contracting Powers, whereupon the Treaty shall terminate as regards all the Contracting Powers.'⁽²⁾

The London Naval Treaty of 1930 which, among other things, prolonged the capital shipbuilding holiday agreed upon in 1922,⁽³⁾ was also due to expire at the end of 1936.⁽⁴⁾ This coincidence of dates was deliberate, partly because it was believed that France would in any case give notice to terminate the original Washington Treaty then.⁽⁵⁾ Such an intention had been stressed in the Report of the Committee of Foreign Affairs to the French Chamber of Deputies when recommending the ratification of the Washington Treaty of 1922. Britain too, had doubts about the wisdom of prolonging all the existing limitations after the end of 1936. The Admiralty 'only accepted a tonnage based on a total of 50 cruisers for that strictly limited period,'⁽⁶⁾ and, moreover, considered it essential for national security to begin a capital ship replacement programme in 1937. In fact, notice to terminate, with the due two years warning, came in December 1934 from Japan.

The Contracting Powers to the Washington Treaty had agreed that a new conference should be held within one year of the date of such notice of termination.⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, by the London Naval Treaty also the Powers involved had, in any case, agreed to hold a further conference in 1935 to frame a new agreement.⁽⁸⁾ There were, therefore, frequent contacts between the interested Powers in 1934 and 1935 to discuss possible terms of such an agreement. During these preliminary discussions it became known that Japan would probably in future demand quantitative equality in the size of her fleet with the United States and Britain instead of the 5:5:3 ratio originally agreed to in 1922.⁽⁹⁾ Japanese spokesmen argued that there should in future be a common upper limitation of naval tonnage for all nations, each Power, within the range of this common limitation, having the right to build according to its security requirements and up to equality with the strongest naval Power.* Britain and the United States, on the other hand, wished to maintain the general existing framework of agreement with its combination of limits on numbers, displacement and gun calibres. Of this framework a vital

* The concept of the 'common upper limit' applied, in other words, to total tonnage; nations would be free, within the total, to build the types of ship best suited to their needs.

feature was, of course, the ratio system. The view of the naval staff in London at the outset of these preparatory talks was that—

‘The greatest certainty, and consequent security, would be provided by qualitative limitation combined with numerical limitation, as was effected between the three principal Powers at Washington, and it is proposed that we should adhere to this method provided that *all* important naval Powers subscribe to it. . . . It is therefore important that we should not again conclude a treaty in which more binding restrictions are accepted by us than by other principal naval Powers. If these Powers cannot be induced to accept numerical limitation of capital ships we must preserve our freedom and accept a total tonnage limitation of the category, coupled with a qualitative limitation in the individual ship.’⁽¹⁰⁾

As it became even more unofficially clear that Japan would demand the right to quantitative equality with Britain and the United States, the Naval Staff had to revise its programme. For it was taken for granted that if quantitative equality was accorded to Japan, then this was an equality ‘which would also have to be granted to the European signatories of the Washington Treaty and which would inevitably be extended to Russia and Germany.’⁽¹¹⁾ This would mean an arms race. And such a race implied rivalry to build not only more but also bigger and more heavily armed ships.

In face of this risk the Naval Staff concluded that if there was to be a less ambitious form of limitation than that imposed at Washington and London, then they were quite clear that qualitative restrictions, i.e. limits on the tonnage of given types of vessel and on gun calibres, were ‘of far more serious consequence’ than restrictions of a quantitative kind, i.e. limits on the overall size of fleets or on the number of vessels in any particular class. Commenting on these problems Admiral Chatfield, then First Sea Lord, wrote as follows at the end of October 1934:

‘It is therefore necessary to consider in advance what is to be the result if Japan denounces the Washington Treaty. Standing in our mental background is the spectre of an armament race. What is meant by an armament race? There are two ways of increasing your naval strength over that of another country:

- (a) By building more ships
- (b) By building larger ships

Of these two (b) is of far more serious consequence.

The armament races of the past have been almost entirely because of the building by one nation of a ship that would outclass that of her rival—the principle of going one better. It was this principle that led to the creation of the Dreadnought and then the Super-Dreadnought. It was this principle that during

the War led to the building of 16-inch gun ships by the United States, and which, if it had not been for the Washington Treaty, would have led to the building of 18-inch gun ships. The greatest accomplishment of the Washington Treaty was not in limiting numbers of total tonnages but in stopping the principle of going one better.

If, therefore, we are to get no treaty and if some measure of competition will consequently be opened, the one thing the interests of this country require is that the competition shall not be in size of ships. If we can avoid this, as it surely can be avoided, then competition can only take place in numbers.

Competition in numbers is a far less serious thing.

Competition in size of ships allows you to spring a surprise on another country as Italy has recently done to France, a surprise which is exceedingly difficult to meet because the designing of new guns and mountings takes a number of years and once a country has got a start by secret preparations her opponent cannot catch her up at once. Competition in numbers is very different. If your opponent lays down an extra ship or two you can reply at once by a similar action if you wish. . . .

It is therefore, in my opinion, outstandingly necessary that should the Washington Treaty lapse we should induce the United States and Japan to agree to qualitative limitation. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it would pay us to fix almost any size limit, within reason, so long as it was fixed. . . .

Another important consideration is what Japan will do, when she denounces the Treaty, as regards the smaller classes of ships. We have had a fairly clear indication from Admiral Yamamoto that they will increase their numbers of destroyers and submarines. I do not think any action they take as regards destroyers need cause us any anxiety. There must be a limit to a race in numbers of destroyers and it is not really a serious problem. The question with regard to submarines is more serious. If Japan builds 120,000 tons of submarines will it have any effect on European nations? I do not see why it should. Undoubtedly the possession of such a powerful force of submarines would greatly increase her defence power in the North West Pacific and increase her dominance in that Area, but I do not feel that such ships would be able to do vital damage to the British Empire in view of the vast distance our main trade routes are from Japan. They would be a serious inconvenience but in view of modern methods of dealing with the submarine I do not think they would be more than that. In fact, for Japan to build a large submarine force may well be looked upon mainly as a defensive move on her part, a very different thing from similar action by France, Russia or Germany.⁽¹²⁾

This was an over-simplified view, born, perhaps to some extent, of the unavoidable limits on what was possible. The Two-Power and

One-Power standards of naval strength had always emphasised the importance of numbers, and numbers were bound to be of vital importance, once again, particularly if Britain should be faced by more than one enemy at sea.

During 1935 there was much discussion between London, Tokyo and Washington on the possible terms of a new naval treaty, with Paris and Rome both frequently joining in.⁽¹³⁾ Finally, in December of that year the long awaited naval conference opened in London.⁽¹⁴⁾ The United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Italy, the British Dominions and India were represented. Throughout the early stages every effort was made to avoid a final decision being taken on Japan's proposal for a common upper limit, in order to minimise the risk of her total withdrawal from the conference. The tactics used were to try to induce the conference to make a general survey of each problem in turn, whether quantitative or qualitative, but to take final decisions on none until the survey had been completed. These tactics were at first successful. After their own common upper limit proposal had been fairly discussed at several early sittings of the conference the Japanese delegates agreed to leave it temporarily in abeyance and to concentrate, instead, on a United Kingdom proposal for limiting construction by means of unilateral and voluntary declarations.⁽¹⁵⁾

After the Christmas recess, however, the attitude of the Japanese hardened. They demanded that the conference should now make clear its view on their particular proposal, stating that, in the event of the decision going against them, they would withdraw from any further part in the proceedings. The crucial debate took place on 15th January 1936. The decision went against Japan, and her delegation withdrew.

However serious the defection of one of the major naval Powers, the fact was that the conference negotiations thenceforward proceeded much more smoothly and expeditiously. There were still difficulties. For example, the French Government objected to the inclusion of both Russia and Germany as possible signatories to a naval treaty. The objection to the inclusion of Germany rested upon the somewhat doubtful argument that France could not sign a naval treaty with Germany without prejudicing her rights under other clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, more particularly those relating to land and air armaments.⁽¹⁶⁾ The French also objected to the inclusion of Russia on the ground that this would prejudice Japan's ultimate accession.

The second difficulty was more serious. It arose out of the reluctance of the United States delegation, at the time of Japan's withdrawal from the conference, to adhere to the qualitative reductions accepted by them during the preliminary talks which preceded the summoning of the conference. The three principal points at issue

were the reduction of the maximum gun calibre of capital ships from 16-inch to 14-inch, the agreement to construct no more 8-inch gun (10,000 ton) cruisers, and the reduction of the future size of the 6.1-inch gun cruiser from 10,000 to 8,000 tons. Without these reductions the value of a qualitative treaty to Great Britain would have been seriously impaired—even though it remained the view of the Admiralty that a qualitative treaty embodying the old Washington limits would be better than no treaty at all.⁽¹⁷⁾ Every effort was made to induce the United States delegation to agree that, since any treaty would be based on the assumption either of Japan's adherence or of her agreeing to conform without official participation, it should contain the same qualitative limitations as those accepted by the United States before Japan decided to withdraw. These representations appeared to have some effect; the final result was a much more promising agreement on qualitative limitations, on paper, than the withdrawal of Japan, would, initially, have seemed to make possible.*

The new Treaty for the Limitation of Naval Armaments was signed on 25th March 1936. The signatories were the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India.† The Treaty was divided into five parts. Part I defined standard displacement, categories of ships and age limits. Part II contained the details of the agreed maximum limits of tonnage and gun calibres for all categories from capital ships down to submarines. Part IV dealt with safeguarding clauses. Part V provided that the Treaty should come into force on 1st January 1937, or as soon after that as the ratifications of the signatory Powers had been deposited, and the Treaty was to remain in force until 31st December 1942.⁽¹⁸⁾

The London Naval Treaty of 1936 was, in many ways, a success for the policy of the British Government which had played so prominent a part both in bringing the conference together and in producing some agreement from its deliberations. True, no quantitative reductions, or even limitations, were possible. On the other hand, by Part III of the Treaty provision was made for voluntary quantitative limitation from year to year by articles which stipulated that annual building programmes should be notified in advance, and that they should not be modified, after such notification, save in exceptional circumstances. There had, of course, been arrangements for exchange

* This agreement was more in the letter than the spirit. Britain accepted the 14-inch gun limitation too hastily, partly because she was so anxious to lay down her new capital ships. In fact, Japan repudiated the relevant clause of the Treaty and the United States, having waited to see what would happen, then followed Japan's lead in fitting larger guns; Italy had already laid down two 15-inch gun ships. Thus every other major Navy had 16-inch or 15-inch gun ships while Britain's battleships had guns of 14-inch calibre.

† The refusal of the Italian Government to sign the Treaty at this stage was a direct result of the sanctions quarrel and not, basically, due to disagreement with the terms of the Treaty.

of information under the Washington and 1930 London Naval Treaties. But by the new arrangements of 1936 these would be both increased in scope and advanced in date. Annual programmes were to be declared by all High Contracting Parties within the first four months of each calendar year, and no High Contracting Party would be permitted to lay down the keel of a ship until four months after the date of the declaration of the annual programme in which the ship appeared. Particulars in regard to design and construction which, under existing treaties, only became available after the completion of a ship had, also by the new proposals, to be communicated at least four months before the laying of the keel, i.e. from three to four years earlier in the case of a capital ship or a cruiser. Clearly, it remained for experience to show whether such safeguards would, in fact, prove effective.⁽¹⁹⁾ But, equally clearly, the adoption of these measures designed to remove secrecy and suspicion in the construction of new ships gave some hope that competition in naval construction would be diminished even if not eliminated.

The results in qualitative restrictions were more specific. With capital ships—still regarded by all countries as the basis of any effective fighting force—room for manoeuvre was restricted. Efforts were made during the conference to induce the United States to agree to a reduction in the size of the capital ship which was strongly desired by most European countries. On the other hand, it soon became clear that the United States Government, which had always looked upon any qualitative limitation as a concession on their part once the possibility of quantitative limitation had disappeared, might withdraw from their provisional undertaking temporarily to reduce the size of cruisers, or might even withdraw from the conference, if they were pressed too hard about the size of capital ships. In the end it was found impossible to persuade the United States Government to go beyond their offer of 35,000-ton capital ships with 14-inch guns, the reduction from 16-inch to 14-inch being conditional upon all parties to the Washington Treaty agreeing to this provision before 1st April 1937.⁽²⁰⁾

The Admiralty, however, considered that cruiser limitations were of greater importance to Britain. Taking the proportion of her capital ships to cruisers as being 15:70, and allowing for the longer life of capital ships, reductions in the size and gun calibre of cruisers was reckoned, in the long run, to be likely to effect a greater saving in expense than would a reduction of, say, two or three thousand tons in the size of capital ships. The cruiser terms were, therefore, the main success of the treaty from Britain's point of view. After 1st January 1937, and up to and including the year 1942, there was to be no further construction of 10,000-ton cruisers or of cruisers carrying an 8-inch gun; during the period the maximum cruiser

displacement was to be 8,000 tons and the maximum gun calibre 6.1-inch. Further, this provision was to remain in force throughout the period mentioned even if Japan did not eventually accede to the treaty, although each signatory would retain, under the special provisions of the safeguarding clauses, the right to construct larger cruisers in certain circumstances.

In agreeing to these important concessions the United States Government made it clear, however, that they did not in any way abandon their intention to resume the construction of 10,000-ton cruisers with 8-inch guns after 1942. Furthermore, they on several occasions expressed their anxiety about the relationship between the treaty heavy cruiser holiday and British proposals for an increase in sub-category (b) i.e. 8,000-ton cruisers. The United States view was that their government might be severely criticised by their own domestic public opinion on the assumption that the British cruiser programme would mean the end of the policy of naval parity between the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations and the United States and that, whilst His Majesty's Government would be free to build as many 8,000-ton cruisers as they required, the United States Government could not construct the type of naval vessels most favoured by their own naval opinion. To safeguard their position the United States therefore made a declaration during the conference to the effect that the acceptance by them of the cruiser holiday was given on the understanding that, in the event of an increase in the cruiser strength of the members of the British Commonwealth beyond that contemplated in the Defence White Paper of 3rd March 1936, viz.; 70, of which 60 would be under age and 10 over age,^{(21)*} or of an abnormal increase in the cruiser strength of any signatory of the Washington Treaty, then the United States Government would be at liberty to resume the building of large cruisers forbidden during the cruiser 'holiday'. Despite these qualifications, however, the Naval Staff in London were firmly of the opinion that the temporary reduction in the size of cruisers, and the suspension of the building of 8-inch gun cruisers, was of genuine value to Britain if only because of the large programme of cruiser construction which Britain was about to undertake during the next few years.⁽²²⁾

The last credit item which should be mentioned here is the later accession to the Treaty of Powers not represented at the London Conference. When the conference dispersed it was understood that negotiations for this purpose had either already begun or would later be begun on a bilateral basis between Britain and other naval Powers.⁽²³⁾ Such negotiations went on with Germany and Russia

* See below, p. 337.

and finally, in July 1937, both Powers agreed, although with certain reservations, to the qualitative limitations of the London Naval Treaty and to the provision in the Treaty for the exchange of information about building programmes.

On the debit side Japan's absence from the final signatories was obviously most important. Although Japan's official withdrawal from the conference had not been the cause of immediate ill-feeling,⁽²⁴⁾ the hopes held for her ultimate accession to the Treaty were not fulfilled. In June 1936 the Japanese Government formally decided not to adhere to the Treaty and this decision was immediately communicated to London. Later, in March 1937, the Japanese Government informed the British Government that they were not prepared to accept the 14-inch maximum on the armament of capital ships, thus rendering that particular clause of the London Treaty nugatory.

Although Italy was not a signatory of the Treaty in March 1936 her general attitude at the conference suggested that her accession was only a matter of time. Indeed, in January 1937, the Italian Government made known their intention not to mount guns of more than 14-inch calibre in their capital ships. For Britain's naval policy, however, what was more important was that in the steadily worsening international conditions of the later nineteen-thirties Italy had now to be reckoned as a potential ally of Britain's two major naval rivals—Germany and Japan. Had she remained outside the scope of the Treaty, and yet on traditional terms of friendship with Britain, all would have been well. But the very fact of her non-accession proved, in the end, to be symbolic of a situation in which unilateral repudiation of agreements had already made the general limitation of armaments meaningless. The London Naval Treaty of 1936 was an attempt to hold back a tide which had already turned.

2. *The D.R.C. Standard, 1936*

While the London Naval Conference was still in session, and indeed before that, the naval staff had turned their thoughts to the building programmes to be undertaken once the limitations of 1922 and 1930 ceased to operate after 31st December 1936. In assessing the pressures dictating the pace and size of Britain's naval programme from now onwards it is necessary first to recapitulate the broad principles underlying the programmes of earlier years.

As we have already seen, the One-Power Standard was accepted at the Imperial Conference of 1921 and reaffirmed, in principle, in the Washington Treaty.^{(25)*} Furthermore, when in 1928 it had been

* See above, Chapter I, Section 3.

laid down as the assumption on which the annual estimates of the Services should be based that there would be no major war for ten years from any particular agreed date,⁽²⁶⁾ it was implied that the readiness of the fleet need be sufficient only to deal with a minor emergency.⁽²⁷⁾ At the same time it was also assumed that the Far East was the only area likely to be affected by any foreseeable war, little danger being anticipated in home waters. Since Japan was regarded as the only likely enemy, a sufficient force was thus required to meet her fleet at its selected moment. Making allowance for docking and refitting British ships, the force required to be sent to the Far East in war was estimated at:

- 12 capital ships
- 5 aircraft carriers
- 46 cruisers
- 9 flotillas of destroyers
- 50 submarines
- 51 minesweeper sloops

It was further accepted that three more capital ships and four more cruisers would be needed for home waters.⁽²⁸⁾

These totals were in fact met by the existing British fleet. The weakness of that fleet lay in the proportion of old ships which it contained—the product of the big building programmes of the First World War—ships which would nearly all need to be replaced at much the same time. Since, however, war then seemed so remote, a very slow rate of replacement was accepted in the 1930 London Naval Treaty⁽²⁹⁾ and in current annual programmes, as a result of which the fleet could not be satisfactorily equipped with modern ships for sixteen years. In the designs of ships the emphasis was placed on suitability for use in a war against Japan in which a general fleet action was still considered a possibility. The *Southampton* type cruisers were primarily designed to match the Japanese *Mogami* class, the *Tribal* destroyers to counter the *Fubuki* class, together with large submarines for service in the Far East where long endurance was essential.

The One-Power Standard, as we have seen, only required that the British fleet, wherever situated, should be equal to the fleet of any other nation, wherever situated. But, by the early nineteen-thirties, the world situation which once made such a standard satisfactory had changed. At the end of the First World War the navies of European Powers, other than that of Britain, were in a state of decline; it was possible at that time to accept a standard which took no direct account of their strength but merely assumed that the margin Britain would have over Japan on the 5:5:3 ratio would be sufficient to meet her needs in home waters as well. The

rebuilding of the French and Italian navies, unhampered by the London Naval Treaty of 1930, upset these calculations. From 1932, therefore, there gradually developed the concept of a new standard which, for the first time, took into consideration the fact that while Britain was engaged in the Far East her security in Europe might be threatened: the new standard postulated that she should be able to retain in European waters a 'deterrent force' to prevent her vital home terminal areas from being interfered with by the strongest European Naval Power while she took up a defensive position in the Far East and effected whatever redispersions were demanded by the circumstances of any particular crisis.*⁽³⁰⁾

This was the D.R.C. standard, and was essentially an attempt to bring the One-Power Standard up-to-date in the context of the worsening, but not, apparently, critical international scene of 1933-35. It was based on the assumptions that Germany and Japan would not engage in naval building at an abnormal rate, that Italy could be kept neutral and reliance placed on France for help in the Mediterranean, and demanded a fleet of the following size to be maintained in peace-time:

- 15 capital ships
- 8 aircraft carriers
- 70 cruisers (of which 10 could be over-age)
- 16 flotillas of destroyers (of which 4 could be over-age)
- 55 submarines
- 120 sloops and minesweepers⁽³¹⁾

The additional ships involved†—20 cruisers and 7 flotillas of destroyers—were not considerable in relation to the overall size of the fleet, but the modernisation and replacement programmes were considerable and reflected the extent to which the ships of the Royal Navy had deteriorated in quality since 1922 even while nominal strength had been maintained.

The detailed suggestions for new building, which were in general accepted by the Cabinet early in 1936, were as follows. Seven new capital ships were to be laid down in the years 1937-39 inclusive at a rate of 2-3-2. It was argued that this high rate was necessary because of the terms of the London Naval Treaty of 1930 which had precluded the building of new capital ships down to the end of 1936 and thus rendered impossible a steady replacement programme for out-of-date vessels. The rate of new building from 1940 onwards would then depend on the programmes of other Powers and also on the possible retention by them of older ships if the quantitative restrictions of 1922 and 1930 were removed. In aircraft carriers 4

* See above, pp. 120 and 259.

† i.e. additional to those of the original One-Power Standard.

vessels (some of a small type) were to be laid down in the period 1936-42. With cruisers it was thought sufficient, for the time being, to adopt the existing Admiralty cruiser replacement programme of 5 new ships a year between 1936 and 1939, although a higher rate might well then become necessary together with the retention of more over-age vessels. With destroyers a steady replacement programme had been undertaken for at least several years past at the rate of one flotilla a year, and quite recently it had been decided to build seven flotilla leaders to match comparable building in several foreign navies. After this, only one more new flotilla would remain to complete the present approved total of 12 under-age flotillas.*

Finally, there were proposals concerning the modernisation of capital ships, all the more important in the light of recent information on the modernisation programmes of other Powers. Complete modernisation was proposed for 3 capital ships and partial modernisation for 4 more; *Nelson*, *Rodney* and *Hood* already ranked as modern ships. So far as the remaining 5 capital ships were concerned, modernisation—although not immediately proposed—would almost certainly become necessary should existing treaty quantitative limits disappear and other Powers then retain their older ships when they had also completed their new construction.

It was pointed out that, partly owing to naval treaties and partly to the difficulty of increasing personnel and material to a sufficient extent during the next three years, it would not be possible to bring the Navy up to the D.R.C. standard by 31st March 1939, or for some years thereafter. However, on the assumption of already planned and new suggested programmes, then the figures for naval strength for the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan on 31st March 1939 were forecast as follows:

Table 6
Forecasts of Completed Ships for Britain, Japan and Germany
at 31st March 1935

| Class of Ship | British Commonwealth | Japan | Germany |
|----------------------|--|--------------------------|--|
| Capital Ships | 3 modern 3 modernised 9 non-modernised | 2 modern 7 modernised | 2 new 3 Deutschlands |
| | 15 Total | 9 Total | 5 Total (excluding 4 very old ships) |
| Aircraft Carriers | 6 | 5 | 1 |
| 8-inch Cruisers | 15 | 12 | 3 |
| Large 6-in. Cruisers | 12 | 6 | 0 |
| Small 6-in. Cruisers | 28 | 18 | 6 |
| Destroyers | 144 | 93 | 38 |
| Submarines | 45 | 39 | 38 ⁽³²⁾ |

* This new building programme would not be completed until 1942.

3. *Proposals for a Two-Power Navy Standard, 1936-37*

In order to understand what was to follow it cannot be emphasised too strongly that the recommendations of the D.R.C. both in modernisation and new building, were designed only to satisfy a new version of the One-Power naval standard.⁽³³⁾ But, as the D.R.C. quite clearly pointed out, that standard was itself out-of-date by the time the recommendations were made.

So as long as Germany was bound by the Treaty of Versailles it was reasonably safe to assume a situation in which the 'necessary redispersions' could be made to meet an emergency arising out of difficulties with Germany while still maintaining a strong defensive in the Far East. This had quite clearly become much more difficult by late 1935 as a result of the resumption by Germany of the right (recognised by the Anglo-German Naval Treaty) to build a new navy free of the restrictions of Versailles. It was calculated that, by 1942, Germany would have afloat five new capital ships in addition to three 'pocket battleships' of the Deutschland class, while Japan would probably have completed by then two new capital ships. Even by 31st March 1939 Germany planned to have three 'pocket battleships' and two new 26,000-ton battle cruisers. In these circumstances, a serious emergency in the Far East would leave Britain with no margin of security to deal with a threat in the West. The D.R.C. therefore urged the Government to consider the implementation of an entirely new standard of naval strength designed

(i) To enable us to place a Fleet in the Far East fully adequate to act on the defensive and to act as a strong deterrent against any threat to our interests in that part of the globe.

(ii) To maintain in all circumstances in Home Waters a force able to meet the requirements of a war with Germany at the same time.

Included in (i) and (ii) would be the forces necessary in all parts of the world, behind the cover of the main fleets, to protect our territories and merchant ships against sporadic attacks.'⁽³⁴⁾

The Committee argued that their new formula stated more explicitly than did the D.R.C. standard that Britain's naval strength should cover effectively both the contingencies mentioned and should be measured, in other words, by a Two-Power standard. To support their view the Committee argued that Britain's planned naval strength ought also to allow for a wider margin of safety. 'Hitherto', their report ran, 'our margin has been illusory, and we are now confronted with the prospect of an increase in the naval

strength of our potential enemies, while in any event nations contemplating an aggression will naturally select the moment when they are at their maximum numerical strength and we, perhaps, at our average.'⁽³⁵⁾ The D.R.C. did not expect or suggest that the Government should embark on so radical and expensive a change of programme immediately; they argued only that the Admiralty should be asked to work out the details required to give effect to the proposed new standard.

The Government, in fact, did broadly as the D.R.C. had recommended. The annual Statement on Defence for 1936 emphasised the 'overwhelming importance of the Navy' in preserving sea communications both to ensure supplies of food and raw materials and in maintaining free passage between the different parts of the Empire for troops and supplies of all kinds. Treaty limitations could not be avoided until the end of that year. But two new capital ships were to be laid down early in 1937 and the modernisation of existing ships was to continue. Further it was announced that the Government proposed to increase the cruiser total to 70—60 under-age and 10 over-age—of which five new ships were to be included in the 1936 programme.⁽³⁶⁾

In the meantime, and without any public announcement that a new standard of naval strength was being considered, the Cabinet asked the Admiralty to investigate in detail what would be needed to make the achievement of such a standard possible.⁽³⁷⁾ A report was then submitted by the Admiralty on 25th May 1936, but again the Government temporised. It was decided—

'That, without prejudice to the standard of naval strength that might be adopted after existing deficiencies had been made good, it was desirable to examine the practicability of accelerating the naval programme and the effect which such acceleration would have on the programmes of the other two Services, and to ask the First Lord to submit his suggestions to that end, including proposals to meet the resultant requirements in personnel.'⁽³⁸⁾

In other words, existing programmes were to be speeded up, but no new standard formally adopted.

The First Lord, Sir Samuel Hoare, produced his suggestions in June. What he proposed was that the programme of each of the next three years, 1937, 1938 and 1939 could be increased to

2 aircraft carriers instead of 1
7 cruisers instead of 5
18 destroyers instead of 9
and 7 submarines instead of 3

Further, the laying down of the three capital ships in the 1937 financial year could be advanced by about six months, viz., to the end of July 1937. In addition to this acceleration in future years, which would obviously require further discussion in due course, the First Lord also pointed out that it was possible to add to and accelerate the existing 1936 programme; the following new ships could be laid down

| | | |
|----------------------|---|--|
| 1 aircraft carrier | — | totalling 2 instead of 1 |
| 2 5,300-ton cruisers | — | totalling 7 instead of 5 |
| 9 destroyers | — | totalling 18 instead of 9 |
| 4 submarines | — | totalling 8 instead of 4 ⁽³⁹⁾ |

These proposed changes in the 1936 building programme were approved early in July,⁽⁴⁰⁾ and were given effect in the second Naval Supplementary Estimates of 1936.⁽⁴¹⁾

The 1937 White Paper on Defence, issued in February of that year, completes this part of the story. In that paper the First Lord's suggested increases to the 1937 programme formed part of the announced plans. The three capital ships in the programme were to be ordered as soon as that programme had received Parliamentary authority; 7 new cruisers were announced for the current year, and two aircraft carriers, instead of one, were to be included.⁽⁴²⁾

In other words, the situation by the spring of 1937 would be that, although no approval had been given to the adoption of a new standard of naval strength, yet the approved building programmes for 1936 and 1937 approximated to such a standard.⁽⁴³⁾ On the other hand, those new programmes were agreed to—certainly by the Chancellor of the Exchequer—on the ground that while they would facilitate the early attainment of the 'new standard' which had first been proposed in principle in the third Report of the D.R.C., should that standard eventually be adopted, yet they in fact represented no more than an acceleration of programmes already laid down and did not prejudice an ultimate decision on the long-term policy. Indeed, when the Chancellor agreed to the accelerated programme for 1936 he expressly reserved the decision as regards future programmes, and stated that 'consideration of the further increases proposed for subsequent years would best be deferred until the individual programmes for those years actually came under examination'.^{(44)*} Clearly this was a temporary compromise. The attempt to turn *ad hoc* agreements into a specific long-term programme was almost certain

* The detailed proposals of the D.R.C. to implement the 1932 version of the One-Power Standard had now become known as the D.R.C. Standard (Fleet); the larger fleet proposed by that Committee in principle, and then referred to the Admiralty for detailed consideration, had become known as the New Standard (Fleet).

to be renewed; moreover, since the Chancellor of the Exchequer was at the time facing increased demands from the Army and the Royal Air Force as well, he, for his part, was equally certain to restrict his concessions as much as possible.

In April 1937 the First Lord submitted a complete and detailed analysis of the requirements for a 'new standard' navy.* He agreed it could be argued that, since the Government was already committed to a maximum building programme for the next two years, then 'the question whether we should adopt a new standard is a point of academical interest since we shall already be working towards that standard at our best speed and cannot attain it for several years to come'. But he countered this argument by claiming that it 'leaves out of consideration all the doubts and difficulties which arise, so long as our ultimate naval strength remains undecided in principle'. The First Lord then went on to argue that a decision in principle was necessary for several reasons. In the first place there was need for—

'... confidence in the basis of our system of Imperial defence. The general foundation of this system is the ability to send the Main Fleet to any particular area which may be threatened. Recent indications have shown clearly that there is doubt whether under existing political conditions in Europe and with the rise of the German navy, we should in fact, be able to send an adequate fleet to the Far East if a menace were to arise in that area.

At present the outside observer sees the German navy rising, he knows that on our existing declared One-Power standard we might be able to send a fleet to the Far East before Germany's programme is complete, but after that date he cannot see how we can do so unless our strength is increased.

It is of the greatest importance to re-establish confidence in the basis of our system of Imperial defence, and it is considered that this can only be done if the responsible authorities at home and overseas are informed that the strength of the British Navy will be increased as necessary to enable it to fulfil its task. Such action presupposes a decision by His Majesty's Government on a new standard.'

Other reasons for a long-term decision were the coming Imperial Conference of 1937 at which naval policy was certain to be discussed. The need, in preparing the 1938 programme, to know what was ultimately in view; for although the building programmes of 1936 and 1937 were not inconsistent with a simple acceleration of building on the existing One-Power standard of naval strength, this would not be so in 1938 and later years. Again, since naval expansion, even more than the expansion of the other Services, was bound to be slow,

* i.e. a 'Two-Power' standard.

it was vital to have plans well prepared in advance if they were not to be overtaken by crises which could be met only by an impossibly rapid growth in the number of ships and men. 'Finally', said the First Lord, 'so long as our ultimate naval strength remains undecided *in principle*, it is difficult to prepare war plans or to consider general strategic dispositions. Such uncertainty prevents the Admiralty from being able to guarantee the Navy's ability to implement our foreign policy.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

The political and military assumptions upon which the First Lord's proposals were based were those enunciated by the D.R.C. in November 1935, when it had claimed that an entirely new standard of naval strength should be considered. In calculating the detailed requirements for a new standard, it was assumed—

'... that our aim in the Far East, so long as the war with Germany lasted, could only be to maintain the situation which existed when the fleet got out to the East and prevent any further offensive operations by Japan.

The fleet required would, therefore, need to be strong enough to give covering protection to our trade in the East, to hold its own in a battle with Japan should she risk such a battle and to prevent her undertaking any major operation against Australia, New Zealand or Borneo so long as our fleet was in being. Our fleet should, however, be sufficiently strong to be able to afford the detachment of small forces to operate offensively with the object of harassing the Japanese navy.

War with Germany would on the other hand, create a threat to our vital home arteries in a manner that could never take place in a war with Japan, and the maintenance of a force fully adequate to counter Germany with a sufficient margin has, therefore, been regarded as essential.'

Calculations based on these assumptions now led the Admiralty to the conclusion that the proposed new standard demanded a navy of the following strength in the principal classes of ship:

Table 7

Estimated Strengths in the Principal Types of Ships for a
New Standard Navy, April 1937

| | | |
|---|--------------|-------|
| Capital ships | 20 | (15) |
| Aircraft carriers | | |
| (including 3 ships at long notice for which no aircraft would be provided in peace) | 15 | (10) |
| Cruisers | 100 | (70) |
| Destroyers | 22 flotillas | (16) |
| Submarines | 82 | (55)* |

* The figures in brackets are the figures for achieving the 'D.R.C. standard'.

Each class was considered in detail in order to provide a justification for the new totals arrived at. It was argued that 'ultimately our sea-power depends on our battle-fleets, and capital ships take so long to build that we should almost certainly end a war with no more than we had at its outset'.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Therefore, so far as capital ships were concerned—

'... to achieve our object of acting on the defensive and serving as a deterrent against any threat to our interests in the East it is necessary that our capital ship strength should be such that Japan's chances of obtaining victory in a fleet action would be so slight that she would not seek one. This condition should be achieved if at our average moment we could meet the full Japanese capital ship fleet with a force less in strength than that fleet by one capital ship.

When allowance is made for our restricted repair facilities... it follows that, to avoid at any time being inferior in ships *available* by more than one capital ship, we must have in the Far East a margin of one ship in excess of the Japanese total.

... The strategical situation in a future war with Germany must in general be similar to that which prevailed in the last war and while the German fleet would be likely to spend most of its time in harbour the initiative as to when it came out to dispute our control would rest with Germany. It follows that, as in the last war, we must be ready at our *average* moment to meet the German fleet at its *selected* moment. Home Waters being our vital area in a way that the Far East never can be, it is essential that this margin shall be sufficient for all contingencies. The margin is composed partly of the superiority necessary to give reasonable certainty of success in battle and partly of that necessary to maintain our normal programme of docking. The proper minimum to meet these contingencies is a superiority of 3 ships.

... The capital ship strength required can be worked out mathematically, but, for practical purposes, our requirement to meet the condition detailed above can be expressed as "1½ times the Japanese strength + 6 ships" or, in tabular form, as follows:

| Japanese Strength | <i>Capital Ships</i> | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | British Strength Required | Corresponding German Strength* |
| 9 (present strength) | 20 | 7 |
| 10 | 21 | 7 |
| 11 | 22 | 7 |
| 12 | 24 | 8 ⁽⁴⁷⁾ |

With aircraft carriers the problem was a two-fold one. First, aircraft carrier tonnage had long been limited by treaty and the

* i.e. on the 35 per cent ratio agreed to in 1935.

limits accepted allowed only for the maintenance of carriers required for work with the Main Fleet. Secondly, although some carriers were assumed to be necessary for employment on trade routes to assist cruisers and armed merchant cruisers in the protection of trade, yet little experience was available in this type of operation and any estimate was liable, to that extent, to be partly guess-work.* Given, however, the two jobs to be done by carriers, the Admiralty estimated its need as follows:

| | |
|--|----|
| for work with the fleet in the East | 4 |
| for work with the fleet in Home Waters | 4 |
| for work on trade routes | 5 |
| for training purposes | 1 |
| | — |
| | 14 |
| | — |

This estimate was, however, complicated by the fact that for many years to come the Royal Navy would have a number of unarmoured carriers which were considered unsuitable for fleet work. The recommendation was made, therefore, that 12 carriers should be accepted for which personnel and aircraft would be provided and 3 in reserve at long notice.†

The cruiser problem was, if anything, more complicated. Estimates of the total number of cruisers required were based upon the double calculation of those needed for work with the main fleets and those needed for control of trade. On the assumption that the cruiser strength required for operations with a battle fleet depended partly on the size of the fleet and partly on the enemy's cruiser strength, the Admiralty claimed that a total of 55 would be needed for this purpose, 25 for operations against Japan and 30 against Germany. Japan had 33 cruisers when this estimate was made, and it was argued that Britain could accept the figure of 25 cruisers in Far East Waters on the assumption of a defensive strategy, 'and so long as Japan does not add to her present numbers.' It was impossible to know at this time what were German intentions in this matter. It was thought reasonable, however, to expect Germany to have 20 cruisers by 1942, and she would thereafter increase that total if and when Britain herself possessed more than 60 cruisers in the under-age category. Obviously, until it was known exactly what Germany would build, it was not possible to make an exact estimate of the cruiser strength needed in Home Waters in a future war with that country, but the total of 30 was claimed not to be excessive in

* The number of carriers for the two main fleets were also said to be 'tentative'.

† This last calculation produces the total of 15 mentioned on p. 340.

view of the need for refits and docking and in the light of the experience of the First World War.

The control of trade problem was compounded of several items. Cruisers, in this connection, were required as convoy escorts, for patrol in focal areas, for operations against enemy trade and to round up enemy raiders and, in future, to provide specially powerful A/A armament to protect shipping from enemy air attack. The memorandum then continued:

‘The number of 45 cruisers for trade work, which has been put forward in the past took no notice of the need for A/A escorts, and assumed that convoy would only be required in one ocean at a time, e.g. in the Indian Ocean. (The method of protection by convoy requires considerably more ships than that of patrol, but, of course, affords better protection.)

Under the new standard of naval strength it is necessary to make provision against an attack on trade by Germany and Japan at the same time. This would necessitate putting convoy into force in both the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. On the face of it this would clearly call for far more than the 45 cruisers required for the Japanese threat above. Exactly how many more is, however, difficult to assess, because the estimate of 45 allowed for 10 cruisers in the Mediterranean and Home Waters, which latter become merged in the larger force of cruisers allocated to the Home Fleet under the new standard proposals.

It is hoped, moreover, that the provision of aircraft carriers to co-operate with the cruisers on the trade routes will lessen considerably the chance of a hostile raider escaping detection. This, in turn, should mean that fewer cruisers will be needed to safeguard a given area. Pending more accurate knowledge of the efficiency of a combination of cruisers and carriers on the trade routes (which is to be tested by special exercises), the Admiralty are prepared to accept the same figure of 45 cruisers for trade protection as was originally contemplated for war with Japan alone.

The total cruiser strength necessitated by the new standard of naval strength is, therefore, as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Main Fleet (Far East) | 35 |
| Main Fleet (Home Waters) | 30 |
| Trade protection | 45 |
| | — |
| Total | 100 |
| | — |

Of this total of 100 it is considered that approximately 15 could be over-age, leaving 85 under-age cruisers to be maintained. Ultimately, this would involve an annual building programme of 4 ships, with a fifth ship every leap year.’

Destroyers, like cruisers, could be divided into two classes, those forming part of the Main Fleet and employed tactically with the fleet in battle, and those employed on local defence, escort or patrol work. The former had all to be under-age destroyers, but a proportion of the latter, particularly those engaged in local defence and anti-submarine escort, could be over-age vessels. Numbers required depended, among other things, on battle-fleet strength and upon the size of the enemy submarine forces likely to be encountered. In addition, new destroyers being built by both Germany and Japan made it necessary for the Royal Navy to possess considerable numbers of the new 'Tribal' or 'J' class vessels capable of engaging in the type of fighting which occurred in the Dover patrol and Harwich forces during the First World War.

The numbers of destroyers estimated as necessary to fulfil this range of duties was:

| | 'Tribal' or 'J' class | Under-Age Destroyers | Over-Age Destroyers |
|----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Eastern Waters | 2 flotillas | 5 flotillas | 2½ flotillas |
| Home Waters | 2 flotillas | 7 flotillas | 3½ flotillas |
| Total | 4 flotillas | + 12 flotillas | + 6 flotillas ⁽⁴⁸⁾ |

The First Lord's memorandum in no way avoided the issue of expense. It was estimated that, on existing standards of maintenance, the stabilised Navy Vote (i.e. the total annual average cost of the Navy after the period of expansion and making good deficiencies had elapsed) would be £104 million.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Various economies, e.g. assuming a longer life for certain categories of ship, and increased reliance on reserves of manpower, were suggested, and an estimate was attempted of the sort of savings which might be made possible by improved relations with Japan or Germany or both. So far as an agreement with Japan was concerned, the effect would be rather upon the degree of readiness than upon actual strength. A political agreement with Germany, providing security against the sudden outbreak of war in Europe while the Commonwealth was engaged with Japan in the Far East, would probably reduce requirements to the 'D.R.C.' standard—with the big exception of capital ships. Since capital ships involved so long a building period, and were unlikely to be added to in war, a total of 20 was claimed to be necessary in any case.

Finally, this detailed memorandum put the broad strategic argument for a much larger navy as clearly as the D.R.C. had done eighteen months before.

The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee in their report have clearly emphasised the difficulty of conducting naval warfare against highly efficient enemies in two theatres so widely separated and, indeed, it is only necessary to recall the late war, where Germany was the only naval enemy to be considered, to realise with what difficulties we should be faced if sufficient forces were not available at all times in both theatres, and especially the Home theatre. When the capital ships now building in Europe are completed, it would not be possible, on our existing standard of naval strength, to safeguard the Empire in the Far East if already engaged in war in Europe; even with Germany limited to 35 per cent of our own strength, we could never take the risk of despatching to the Far East a sufficient fleet to act as a deterrent to Japanese aggression. The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee stated, moreover, that "it would be suicidal folly to blind our eyes to the possibility of a simultaneous or practically simultaneous, threat on both fronts".

In the opinion of the Admiralty so long as a possibility of war both in the East and in Europe exists it is only possible to ensure our security and safeguard our Imperial position, as the German navy is rebuilt, if the proposed new standard of naval strength is worked to.

The Admiralty consequently consider it to be of the greatest importance that His Majesty's Government should adopt this new standard of strength and authorise the Admiralty to base their plans and requirements on this standard.⁽⁵⁰⁾

4. *The New Standard of Naval Strength and Financial Limitations, 1937-39*

The D.P.(P) Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. noted the gravity of the naval situation revealed by the Admiralty report just described but decided, in view of the serious financial implications of the proposals, to postpone a definite recommendation.⁽⁵¹⁾ That postponement was, in the end, prolonged for about eighteen months.

We have already seen how the Cabinet, under pressure from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, set on foot a review of the defence programmes as a whole, present and prospective, in the summer of 1937,^{(52)*} and that, in the autumn, the Cabinet handed over the details of the review to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence for his further examination and recommendation. In his interim report to the Cabinet in December 1937 the Minister summed up the current naval situation as follows. He reminded his colleagues that the Admiralty's proposals concerning the new Standard Fleet (i.e. those proposals which have just been examined in detail) were

* See above, pp. 279-80.

based on an assumption of the need to be prepared for simultaneous war against Germany and Japan. They took no account of the possibility of Italy also being hostile nor, conversely, had mention been made of help which might be forthcoming from France or from other allies. These proposals had further assumed the limitation of the German Fleet in accordance with the terms of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935. It would be unwise to count on that as a valid assumption indefinitely. The Minister also agreed that it would be an advantage to the Admiralty to have an early decision on the ultimate size of the Fleet for the purpose not only of planning future strength but also to regulate the intake of personnel. Finally he pointed out that the Admiralty had represented to him that 'unless a complete change takes place in the international situation, the D.R.C. fleet . . . in no way represents the realities of the position. One of the features, for example, of the D.R.C. programme is that it would involve eventually the premature scrapping of ships which have now been, or are being modernised'.

Against all this Sir Thomas Inskip agreed that a final decision on the size of fleet to be planned in the long-term could properly be deferred yet a little longer. As regards new construction, the Admiralty's proposals so far for 1938-39 did not exceed the D.R.C. standard except for one destroyer flotilla and three submarines and these, in any case, would probably not be laid down until the end of the financial year. With battleships the main decision whether to exceed the D.R.C. standard would not arise until 1940. For the time being, therefore, it was possible for the Admiralty to proceed broadly on the basis of the D.R.C. standard without prejudice to the adoption, at a later date, of the proposed new Two-Power standard should a decision to that effect be taken subsequently. He therefore made two proposals. First, that the Admiralty should not for the present incur expenditure committing the country to anything beyond the D.R.C. standard. Second, that the Admiralty should consider modified proposals concerning the scrapping of modernised ships even though some departure from the D.R.C. standard might thereby be involved. Finally, he accepted the fact that any decision to increase naval strength beyond the D.R.C. standard would have to be taken before the details of the 1939 programme were settled. Other reasons apart, the Admiralty was committed to giving Germany notice of any such intention during 1938. In other words, there could be delay but not for long.⁽⁵³⁾

The Cabinet considered Inskip's report a few days before Christmas 1937 and accepted its main proposals. Undoubtedly the most important assumption underlying that approval was that the revised forecasts now to be asked for from the Defence Departments should be designed to bring the total defence expenditure over the five

years 1937-41 within a figure of £1,500 million. So far as the navy was concerned it was accepted that he would deal, in his next report, with any modified proposals involving an increase beyond the D.R.C. standard which the Admiralty might wish to suggest, but that the final decision on this subject need not necessarily be taken until the next year. The Admiralty, like other Departments, was now to submit revised forecasts of the cost of programmes over the next five years based on these Cabinet decisions.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Early in February 1938 the Admiralty submitted its new financial figures, although it was not able at that point to include any statement about the premature scrapping of ships under the D.R.C. programme.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The financial forecast was followed a few days later by a memorandum explaining the numbers and types of ships involved.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The Admiralty financial forecast, like some similar recent estimates, was prepared on two separate and distinct bases, i.e. that of the D.R.C. standard and that of the proposed new standard of naval strength. In summarised form the forecasts were as follows:

Table 8
Forecast of Costs of D.R.C. Fleet and New Standard Fleet,
1937-41
(£ million)

| | D.R.C. Fleet | | Proposed New Standard Fleet | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | October 1937 Forecast | Revised Forecast | October 1937 Forecast | Revised Forecast |
| 1937 | 105 | 105 | 105 | 105 |
| 1938 | 122 | 130.6 | 124.5 | 130.6 |
| 1939 | 123 | 151.5 | 131 | 152 |
| 1940 | 103.5 | 128 | 123.5 | 141.5 |
| 1941 | 81 | 110 | 115.5 | 138 |
| Total for 5 years: | 534.5 | 625.1 | 599.5 | 667.1 ^{(57)*} |

In explaining these proposals, which now included three capital ships, two aircraft carriers and seven cruisers, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Duff Cooper, claimed that they followed strictly the policy already approved for 1936 and 1937, i.e. to speed up rearmament as much as possible; the present proposals represented the maximum effort possible, having regard to the needs of these other Services. Indeed, he admitted that his figures could be regarded as

* See above, p. 290.

too optimistic, in the sense that comparatively little work on the capital ships in the current financial year would be possible, owing to the need for designing new gun mountings. On the other hand, he argued that it was desirable, for political reasons, to include three instead of two capital ships.⁽⁵⁸⁾ In so far as this implied not merely an acceleration of old programmes but the adoption of an entirely new standard, he insisted that '... the D.R.C. Fleet is now a purely paper conception which is in no way related to the present international situation, or to the barest necessities of Imperial Defence; in other words, it should not be regarded as in any sense an alternative which the Government could be advised to accept as an alternative to the New Standard'.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Mr. Duff Cooper went on:

'Nine months ago my predecessor laid before the D.P.(P) proposals for a new standard of naval strength, and he then made it plain to the Committee that, unless there was a fundamental improvement in international relations in the near future, those proposals represented the minimum consistent with naval security. The present construction programme does not commit the Government to the new standard. But, meanwhile, the international situation can hardly be said to have improved. Our relations with the most important Naval Power with whom we are likely to find ourselves in conflict have steadily deteriorated, and we have been compelled to contemplate the despatch of the Fleet to the Far East as a possibility no longer remote. Even since this programme was drawn up events in Germany seem to have rendered the outlook increasingly uncertain. Dictators faced by disaffection at home have, throughout history, turned to adventure abroad as the solution of their difficulties. In these circumstances, the position of a defence Minister in this country who was unable truthfully to assert that he was taking every step in his power to complete, and to hasten the completion, of his preparations for the worst eventuality would be most unenviable.'⁽⁶⁰⁾

In dealing with these new figures the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence limited himself to pointing out that, over the period 1937-41 as a whole, the estimated cost of the D.R.C. fleet had increased by £90 million, and that of the New Standard fleet by £68 million, the greater part of these increases being borne in the last three years of the quinquennium. These increased costs were to some considerable extent due to estimated increases in wages and prices. But it also appeared that the revised forecast with regard to the D.R.C. fleet related to a materially larger fleet than the one catered for in the forecast of October 1937.⁽⁶¹⁾

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, was forthright

in his criticisms. His case was that this new suggested naval construction programme for 1938, costing £70 million to complete, should be 'substantially reduced'. Reaffirming, what everybody admitted, that the accelerated new construction programmes of 1936 and 1937 had been agreed to on the ground that they would facilitate the attainment of a new standard fleet, should such a standard ultimately be adopted, he went on to argue that the First Lord's new proposals, if accepted, actually committed the Government to the new standard. If the proposed 1938 programme was approved, then the Admiralty would have laid down in three years nearly as many cruisers as, and more aircraft carriers, destroyers and submarines than, the original D.R.C. programme had envisaged for a seven year period. If, therefore, the newly proposed 1938 programme were to be accepted, a continued adherence to the D.R.C. standard as long-term policy would involve an almost complete cessation of building in some important classes of ships from 1939 onwards for some years. 'I feel sure', the Chancellor commented, 'that the Admiralty would not contemplate this . . . I do not, therefore, see my way to agree to a Programme which, in my view, clearly prejudices the issue of the ultimate strength of the Navy, an issue which was expressly reserved in the Interim Report of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence.'⁽⁶²⁾

The Cabinet considered these various memoranda at its meeting on 16th February 1938.⁽⁶³⁾ That was the meeting at which it agreed to a total defence expenditure, in the financial years 1937-41, of £1,650 million as against the 1937 estimate of £1,570 million.* A decision on the Admiralty proposals was postponed for one week, and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was instructed to confer with the Chancellor and the First Lord in the meanwhile to try to reach an agreed conclusion. For this purpose, the First Lord drew up yet a further memorandum. In this he amended his proposals of early February, suggesting a new construction programme for 1938 which included two capital ships instead of three, one aircraft carrier instead of two, and no destroyers instead of the earlier figure of sixteen. This would involve expenditure of £48 million a saving of £22 million on his earlier and more ambitious programme.

The First Lord, however, did not stop there. He argued that the current defence Estimates were, because of the disturbed nature of the international situation, likely to be subject to closer inspection and more rigorous public criticism than at any time previously. Anything which seemed to denote a falling away from the standard of effort of the last year or two was likely to be seized upon as

* See above, p. 295.

evidence that the assurances, so often given and so recently repeated, that all was going well with the rearmament programme were no longer correct. Further, the next eighteen months were likely to be, from a naval point of view, the most anxious period the country had faced so far; three capital ships were undergoing reconditioning and none of the new construction would be complete. This situation would be made worse by the fact that, in that period, Italy and Germany would be much better off than France in new capital ships completed. 'I suggest', wrote the First Lord, 'that during the dangerous period it is most important to present a bold front and to prevent the growth of suspicion that our resources begin to be exhausted'. Finally he urged that, if his present compromise proposals were accepted, then the items dropped from his earlier programme should be regarded as only deferred and not abandoned.⁽⁶⁴⁾

On 23rd February 1938 the Cabinet considered these matters again, and again failed to reach any firm conclusion on the matter of long-term naval standards. All that Ministers could agree to was, first, that the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, the Chancellor, the First Lord and the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs should go into the details of ship-building programmes together, including a suggestion that the co-operation of the Commonwealth of Australia should be sought with a view to bearing the cost of the third capital ship. Second, that if these Ministers could not reach agreement on new naval construction then they would have to bring their differences back to the whole Cabinet once more.⁽⁶⁵⁾

In fact, before any further Cabinet discussions took place the 1938 Statement Relating to Defence announced a new construction programme for 1938 which corresponded very closely to the compromise proposals which the First Lord had put to the Cabinet for its meeting on 23rd February, i.e. 2 capital ships, 1 aircraft carrier, 7 cruisers and 3 submarines.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Clearly, however, the published proposals were not yet based on any agreed long-term policy. And the debate about such a policy, a debate arising from the fundamental difference between what the Government's military advisers said was necessary and what its financial advisers said was possible, went on for several months more. On 11th March the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence wrote to each of the Service Ministers informing them of the sort of figures which, from a preliminary survey, he had in mind as allocations over the years 1938-41. The allocations suggested for the Navy were:

| | |
|------|---------------|
| 1939 | 135 £ million |
| 1940 | 120 £ million |
| 1941 | 100 £ million |

A little later the First Lord replied to the effect that if naval expenditure were to be restricted to anything like these figures, it would not be a question of economy, or of sacrifice here and there, but of questioning fundamentally the scope of naval rearmament as hitherto contemplated. He said that on the basis of the D.R.C. fleet the Admiralty would want about £30 million more than the Minister's suggested figures over the three years, and on the basis of the New Standard fleet £80 million over the same period. A week or two later the First Lord asked the Cabinet to provide yet a further £31 million, irrespective of any figures agreed upon hitherto, for measures of defence against air attack—e.g. underground storage of fuel and ammunition—which were regarded as of the first importance from the Admiralty's point of view. The Cabinet's response was to ask the First Lord to try to bring these new demands within the scope of the financial limits set by the Cabinet in February. To this he replied—and it is difficult not to agree that it was the proper reply in the circumstances—that he wanted the Cabinet to set on foot forthwith yet another examination of the rôle of the Navy, with a view to laying down a definite standard for the guidance of the Admiralty. Decisions about future naval strength, he argued, could not be delayed beyond September 1938 when the planning of requirements for 1939 would begin. This request led to some discussion among Ministers, particularly the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence and the First Lord, during May and June. And in mid-July the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence sent to the Cabinet a memorandum in which he urged that a firm decision about the long-term development of the Navy should be agreed upon as soon as possible; he made it clear that, in his view, the lack of a decision as to the general policy governing naval preparations was highly embarrassing to the Admiralty, and that if a decision was much further delayed this could only result in unbusinesslike and uneconomic administration.⁽⁶⁷⁾

The position reached by now was, briefly, as follows. On the basis of the D.R.C. fleet the Admiralty wanted £40 million more in the three years 1939-41 than the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had allowed for on his rationing system: on the basis of the New Standard fleet, £88 million more would be needed. Moreover, from 1942 onwards stabilised costs would be considerably in excess of what the Treasury considered financially possible. Behind these differences in financial estimates lay differences of a more basic kind. The First Lord considered a system of rationing the Defence Departments as impossible to justify. The right course, in his view, was to decide upon what was necessary to ensure the security of the Empire and then to discuss the means of meeting the cost; further,

that it was easier to ascertain what were adequate defences than what were the country's financial resources and that the danger of underrating the former was greater than the danger of overrating the latter. For his part, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was convinced that there was no alternative to some system of rationing if the Government was to ensure the best distribution of available resources in accordance with a single defence policy.

What made this difference of basic approach more serious was an apparent discrepancy between actions and intentions. In three successive years, 1936, 1937 and 1938, the Government had decided to lay down much larger programmes of new construction than those prepared, on the old One-Power basis, in the 1935 D.R.C. Report. In consequence, by the end of 1938 they would have laid down, except for capital ships, very nearly all the major vessels which, under the D.R.C. proposals, were to have been spread over the seven programmes of 1936 to 1942; and the latest estimated cost of the three approved programmes of 1936-38 was just over £169 million as against the D.R.C. estimate of £200 million for the full seven years.

The view of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, and of those who thought like them, was that this acceleration of the D.R.C. standard had been undertaken to eliminate deficiencies as rapidly as possible; they maintained that the D.R.C. proposals to implement a new version of the One-Power standard remained the official policy, and that the speeding up of programmes in no way implied a departure from that policy. The First Lord of the Admiralty objected to the view that the D.R.C. fleet was something which bore the stamp of official approval while any new, and more ambitious standard, was to be regarded as an unauthorised project. He thought it would be more accurate to say that, since 1936, the Government had been working on a hand to mouth policy without any firm decision as to the ultimate strength of the fleet.

In his summing up and recommendations for the Cabinet the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence admitted that the Naval Staff, in investigating the country's strategic needs and drawing up proposals for a new standard of naval strength, had done only what the Government had invited them to do. And he went on, 'I do not think that any of my colleagues will wish to question the technical advice, given by our expert advisers, that a Fleet of the size proposed is necessary to afford us security on the basis that we may be called upon to carry out the policy proposed'.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Moreover, he also admitted the attraction of the argument that, in the confused international situation, short-term views were inevitable, and perhaps the best course might be to do everything possible to build up the nation's defences in the next two or three years without paying too meticu-

ous a regard to financial limitations. In fact, however, this was not an argument he himself agreed with. The building of a fleet and the training of personnel were long-term matters, and posed problems different, in many ways, from those of other branches of defence preparations. 'We cannot hope', he argued, 'to find an easy way out of our difficulties by a short-term programme of rapid expansion, to be followed, if need be, by rapid contraction. Further, it would be wrong to build up the Navy at great expense over the rearmament period to such a size that it be clearly quite beyond our means to maintain the Fleet once it had been built up to the new level'. The Minister's conclusions were clear.

'... the cost of the New Standard Fleet would strain our available resources. As I see the matter the choice of courses before us is as follows:

On the one hand, it is open to us to decide that, notwithstanding the cost involved, it is essential that we should have a Fleet of the size proposed by the Admiralty in order to be able to carry out effectively the policy on which the proposed New Standard is based. It seems clear that, if we adopt this course, large countervailing economies would have to be made, either in the field of defence, or in the social services.

On the other hand, it is open to us to decide that we are unable to meet the full cost of the Admiralty proposals. In that case two courses are open to us:

Either we must shape our policy to avoid the double contingency for which the New Standard Fleet is proposed.

Or else we can decide that, while the policy in general should not be modified, we must attempt to carry out that policy with more slender resources than those deemed to be adequate by the Naval experts. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that even if we were to adopt the Admiralty proposals in principle, some years must elapse before we could attain the Fleet standard now proposed by the Admiralty.

It must, of course, be clearly recognised that if we decide on a course which involves the adoption of a smaller Fleet than is recommended by our technical advisers as necessary to give adequate security on the basis of a given policy, then the responsibility for the decision taken rests upon the shoulders of His Majesty's Ministers.

* * * * *

I have reached the conclusion that, having regard to the extent of the demands likely to be made on our available resources, and in particular to the increased demands likely to be made by the Air, which at the present time is of the utmost importance, the proposed New Standard of naval strength is impossible of attainment and that we must rest content with

something substantially less. I recommend that this decision should be made.⁷⁽⁶⁹⁾

The Cabinet discussed this memorandum at some length on 20th July. While admitting that the Minister's general presentation was a fair one, the First Lord of the Admiralty felt bound to challenge his conclusions. The importance of seapower, Mr. Duff Cooper argued, was as great as ever. If it was believed, whether in the House or by the general public, that all was not going well and that the Government were rejecting the advice of their naval experts as to the minimum needed for security, there would be such a storm of protest that the Government could not hope to survive. His view, as he had made clear before, was that the system of rationing the Defence Departments was a mistake. The right course was to decide first upon policy, then to ask the experts what was necessary to carry out that policy, and then to find the money. If the country was in danger, then it was wrong to maintain all the social services and yet fail to provide necessary defence. Furthermore, while expenditure on defence might well be reduced if foreign policy reduced the numbers of Britain's potential enemies, there was little sign so far of success of that sort. As a compromise, he suggested that the Cabinet should formally approve the new standard of naval strength, but that work should be carried out without a fixed time limit and agreed upon each year in the light of the current financial and international situation.

Mr. Duff Cooper had his supporters. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, said that he would have liked to delay a decision on the new standard as long as possible; he wished to keep the situation fluid. But, if a decision had to be made now, then he, for one, did not believe that the new standard fleet was impossible of attainment; in fact, as a standard it was inevitable, the only debatable issue was the time to be taken in reaching it. Any different view would be a terrible shock for the Dominions. Others, besides the Home Secretary, took the same line, even if this meant pressing the Dominions for more help.

In the end, however, the views of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer were accepted. It was decided that the standard of naval strength must be tailored to fit the financial resources available.⁷⁰⁾ This meant, in effect, the acceptance of a rationing system on the basis, broadly speaking, of the total sum already allocated to the three Defence Departments in the previous February,* and the rejection 'in present circumstances', of the new standard fleet. A

* See above, p. 295.

week later the Cabinet agreed that a sum of £410 million should be allocated to the Admiralty for the three remaining years of the quinquennium, April 1939-March 1942, this representing a compromise between the £355 million originally proposed by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence and the figure of £443 million asked for by the Admiralty. Mr. Duff Cooper, while expressing his gratitude for the extent to which the Admiralty's requests had in the end been met, was quite unable to shake the Cabinet from their view that they were not in any way committed to the new standard fleet.⁽⁷¹⁾

Soon after the Munich crisis, on 26th October 1938, a Cabinet committee was set up 'to consider proposals for extending the scope of the Defence Programmes and measures designed to accelerate production'.⁽⁷²⁾ So far as the Royal Navy was concerned the recent crisis had revealed that there were shortages in escort vessels, and also in minesweepers, with serious implications for all trade protection and convoy work; the Cabinet, therefore, immediately approved the ordering of additional vessels of these types.⁽⁷³⁾ A further Admiralty paper disclosed that there was little that could be done to accelerate either the refitting or the new construction programme for the Fleet, and that largely because of labour problems.⁽⁷⁴⁾ To that extent the direct impact of Munich on naval rearmament was very limited.

No additional building programme was proposed by the Admiralty throughout the winter of 1938-39 and the spring of the latter year. In June 1939, however, following the denunciation by Germany of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, and in view of the threatening posture of Japan in the Far East, the First Lord—Lord Stanhope—returned to the problem of future Fleet needs.⁽⁷⁵⁾ He dealt only with capital ships since these afforded, so he argued, 'the main real test of relative strength'. He did not contest what he described as the 'long accepted view' that it was 'beyond the capacity of this country and France alone to provide adequate naval forces to deal simultaneously with a major war with Germany, Italy and Japan'. Moreover, he went on to argue, that incapacity would become even more serious by late 1940 so far as the relative naval strengths of France and Italy were concerned. Nevertheless, he confined himself on this occasion, as it had been normal Admiralty practice in the past, simply to a comparison of Britain on the one hand and Germany and Japan on the other.

Lord Stanhope reminded his colleagues that the accepted necessary minimum margin of British superiority in capital ships over Germany and Japan combined was estimated at four ships, one over Japan in the Far East and three over Germany in Home Waters. (For a detailed explanation of this estimate Lord Stanhope

referred Ministers back to a memorandum prepared by the Board of Admiralty in the spring of 1937.)⁽⁷⁶⁾ On the basis of British and foreign programmes already decided upon, which would determine naval strengths to the end of 1943, we would have no superiority at all, but a minimum deficiency of three ships on the accepted standard, and would then 'fall steadily further behind if Germany, Japan and ourselves [were to] build to our present maximum capacity annually.' The First Lord admitted that the future was uncertain. Perhaps Germany or Japan, or both, would choose not to build up to capacity. But he produced some evidence which, he thought, suggested that Germany, in fact, now planned to build up to her maximum of two capital ships a year, and that Japan was planning an increase in her present annual capacity of one ship. On this basis we would have to deal with a position in which three capital ships can be built regularly each year against us'.

The current building capacity of the Royal Navy was sufficient for two 16-inch gun ships a year, provided some additional capacity was built for the annual production of four new 16-inch guns and two relines. It would also be possible, in the 1940 programme, to include a further 15-inch gun ship using turrets already in reserve, and provided further capacity was made available for machining tools for existing disused gun pits. These suggestions for expanding gun production capacity at a total cost of rather more than £1 million had been put forward earlier in the year but had not yet been approved by the Treasury. But if the Government were to go further than that and agree to an annual programme of three new capital ships from the 1941 programme onwards, then the additional ship-building and the provision of guns, gun-mountings, fire-control equipment, etc., would 'entail resources in labour very considerably above anything now at the disposal of the Admiralty and the contractors working for them'. All this would carry with it a 'diversion of skilled labour badly needed elsewhere' and perhaps even some 'compulsory powers over the disposal of labour'.

Lord Stanhope's view was that, in order both to be prepared for the worst in an arms race if it actually happened, and also if possible for the consequent radical economic and industrial reorganisation hitherto regarded as impossible except during war, then the only solution was a combination of immediate *ad hoc* measures and longer term deterrence. The first would involve agreement to the measures just described to make two 16-inch gun ships annually possible and the addition of a 15-inch gun ship to the 1940 programme. So far as the second was concerned, all the Admiralty was asking for was not a definite decision to build three 16-inch gun ships annually from 1941 onwards, but simply for authority to conduct a thorough investigation into all the implications of a programme on that scale.

The First Lord argued that agreement on this second proposal would be 'the surest method of avoiding [a German-Japanese attempt to outpace us by making] clear from the outset that we are in a position to defeat any such attempt.' One is left to assume that some publicity would have to be given to measures decided upon so that a deterrent effect would be achieved.

The C.I.D. discussed Lord Stanhope's memorandum at some length on 6th July 1939.⁽⁷⁷⁾ It is true that there was something of a shock in its forecast of so serious a deficiency in what was considered a vital area of national defence. It is also true that the paper had not attempted to set out the whole picture of what would be involved, e.g. the necessary provision of other types of ship, increased supplies of ammunition, etc. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer found no great difficulty, therefore, in fighting a rear-guard action for careful spending and no hasty action. The C.I.D. approved the immediate measures proposed for one 15-inch gun ship and for making production capacity available for two 16-inch gun ships per year. But so far as the longer-term policy was concerned the Admiralty was instructed, in consultation with the Treasury, to undertake a 'comprehensive review of all the implications' of deciding to build three 16-inch gun ships a year from the 1941 programme onwards, and to report to the C.I.D. in October 1939. By that date war had already begun and other decisions had to be made.

5. *Naval Rearmament and Production Problems, 1938-39*

Progress reports to the D.P.R.C. during the period July 1938 to June 1939 provide detailed information on new building completed and new ships ordered. In these months one aircraft carrier (*Ark Royal*), five cruisers (including two re-fitted), eighteen destroyers and eight submarines were completed together with a large number of smaller craft; in the same period two battleships (*Lion* and *Temeraire*), one aircraft carrier, seven cruisers and eight destroyers were ordered. Most of the reports speak of progress in these matters as being 'generally satisfactory'.⁽⁷⁸⁾ What these details do not reveal, however, is how the weight of new building, especially fitting out work, grew immensely heavier in 1939. Table 9 (p. 358) illustrates this point much more satisfactorily.

In this great expansion programme there was not, on the whole, a shortage of ship capacity; there was, however, a general shortage of suitable labour and this will be illustrated a little later on. The worst shortages, with their consequent delays in completion, appear to have occurred in armour and in gun mountings. At the end of the war in 1918 there was an estimated maximum annual output of

Table 9

New Naval Shipbuilding 1936-39 (tonnage totals)

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Total tonnage in hand at end of year</i> | <i>Naval tonnage launched</i> |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1936 | 375,740 | 90,260 |
| 1937 | 547,014 | 92,090 |
| 1938 | 544,000 | 60,980 |
| 1939 (to 30 Sept. only) | 904,500 | 256,730 ⁽⁷⁹⁾ |

60,000 tons of armour from five major firms. In the period of the Ten Year Rule annual requirements dropped to 3,000 tons and at least two firms scrapped their plant on being told that no further orders would be placed with them. Requirements rose somewhat after 1931 but, even in 1935, stood at only 7,000 tons. With the adoption of the D.R.C. programme however, and with the acceleration of that programme from 1936 onwards, demand rapidly increased, and it was estimated that total requirements for the five-year period 1936 to 1941 would be about 170,000 tons. Not only would demand increase, but it would do so irregularly, being at its peak in the years 1937-39. Plans were therefore made for greatly increased production at three firms—The English Steel Corporation, Beardmore and Firth Brown; but by late 1937 it was clear that production was well behind demand, probably amounting to a total of about 65,000 tons in the three years 1937-39.⁽⁸⁰⁾

There were a number of clearly identifiable reasons for the shortage. Labour recruitment was far less successful than originally anticipated; there were delays in Admiralty specifications for new types of main deck and side armour for capital ships; machine tools were in short supply, and it was not uncommon for a gap of twelve months and more to occur between orders and deliveries;⁽⁸¹⁾ finally, the demand for armour was, in any case, much larger than originally anticipated, partly because of the acceleration of programmes from 1936 onwards and partly because there were entirely new demands for aircraft carriers, for depot ships and for caissons.

Plans were therefore made for yet further increased production at Beardmore and Firth Brown and for bringing in a new firm, Colville. But this could make little difference immediately and supplies were therefore sought abroad.⁽⁸²⁾ It appeared that the only possible foreign sources were America and Czechoslovakia; Krupps of Germany and Schneider of France were unable to accept orders.⁽⁸³⁾ Negotiations went some way with the Carnegie-Illinois Company of America for 1,000 tons for the depot ship Tyne, but then broke down. 'It was a Treasury condition that sample test

plates should be furnished by the firm and passed as satisfactory before an order could be given',⁽⁸⁴⁾ and Carnegie insisted on a definite order without tests. Negotiations with the Czech firm of Vitkovice were more successful. A total of 12,500 tons was ordered and deliveries continued satisfactorily up to the outbreak of war despite the fact that the firm had now passed into German control.⁽⁸⁵⁾ In fact, by the outbreak of war annual supplies from all sources had risen to over 70,000 tons, a satisfactory figure for all contemplated needs and no further delays on this account were then anticipated.

Gun mounting production proved to be a more serious problem and was certainly less satisfactorily dealt with by the outbreak of the war. The critical importance of gun mountings in new construction time tables can be illustrated by remembering that the period which elapsed from the date of ordering 14-inch quadruple turrets to their delivery and installation on board was, on average, about three years; moreover, propelling machinery could not be finally lined up until turrets were in position and a further twelve months normally elapsed between installation and completion dates.

As with armour, gun mounting capacity had been greatly reduced during the period of the Ten Year Rule. The Admiralty guaranteed not to place orders with any other firm than Vickers Armstrong. By 1936, however, it was clear that one firm could not cope with the expansion programme and that new capacity must be created both with Vickers and elsewhere. At that time it was estimated that gun mounting demands for already approved construction would amount to well over five thousand tons and would completely take up existing capacity; by 1939 more than double that quantity would be needed. In 1936, therefore, the Supply Board allocated a part of the production of four other firms to the Admiralty and test orders were soon placed with them. Unfortunately the new firms were capable of manufacturing only the smaller types of mounting, e.g. for 4.7-inch, 4.5-inch and 4-inch guns, and it was essential that there should be also some expansion at Vickers to cater for heavier types and particularly 14-inch guns. There was, therefore, some considerable expansion at Barrow and, though to a lesser extent, at Elswick. But it was realised from the beginning that Vickers would be overloaded and serious delays soon became apparent, at first 3-4 months and gradually more. The reasons were familiar ones. Mountings for the expansion programme were often of new design; there were drawing department difficulties in production firms and complaints of dilatory methods of inspection and approval in the Admiralty. Machine tools were in short supply and so were some materials, especially steel. Finally, there were labour shortages due, to some extent, to Army competition. At Barrow, for example, there was a high priority for gun mountings for the Air Defence of Great Britain, and men were

employed on this work who could, otherwise, have been working on Admiralty orders.

A number of remedies were adopted. First, Vickers began sub-contracting on a considerable scale from the spring of 1938 onwards, although with little effect on production by the time war broke out. Next, the Admiralty adapted some of its own procedures by an increase in inspecting staff, by establishing priorities and by reducing trial times, the object being to reduce delays from nine or ten months to something less than half that time. But, despite all efforts, there were still difficulties, not least in the supply of fitters and of fitter erectors for assembling machined parts; and since dilution and direction of labour were regarded as impossible in peace-time, no obvious solution presented itself. The shortage of gun mountings appears the most serious cause of delay in Admiralty progress reports to the C.I.D. in the spring and summer of 1939. And it was largely because of this particular shortage that, in the summer of that year, it was decided that building programmes—at any rate in the short-term—would be based on the numbers and types of gun mountings available. This meant, for example, that no more capital ships would be laid down for the time being while those in the 1938 and 1939 programmes would be delayed; there would also be delays in the 6-inch cruiser and in the destroyer programmes.⁽⁸⁶⁾ One further consequence was that at any rate some capacity would be freed for more construction in the vitally important small ship classes, trawlers and escort vessels.

There is one further relevant topic which must be dealt with briefly here, i.e. the connection between naval and merchant ship building programmes. Because of limitations mainly on labour and equipment supply—ship capacity was less of a problem—it was calculated in 1936 that, if war broke out against Germany in 1940, and if currently planned naval ship construction were maintained, then available capacity for new merchant ships would be restricted to a little over 900,000 tons in the first year of war. Since this was not considered enough, a decision was made to reduce planned construction of sloops and minesweepers by 50 per cent raising the merchant shipping total to 1,200,000 tons.⁽⁸⁷⁾

By the end of 1938, however, these calculations were no longer realistic. In naval shipbuilding it was now apparent that it would in any case be impossible to provide gun mountings for many of the larger ships already planned, while there had been changes in earlier programmes. Further, there had also been changes in the estimates of the numbers of merchant ships which were to be converted in war. As a result, and if calculations were to be more accurate, some sort of list was required of the naval ships that actually would be laid down in the event of an emergency. Such a list would also need to

be revised at regular intervals. Investigations were therefore put in hand, based on the assumption of the outbreak of war as from certain given dates, e.g. 1st April and 1st October 1939, which resulted in revised and detailed emergency new naval construction and conversion programmes. These programmes depended essentially on available equipment and not on the capacity of the shipyards in terms of ships and machine tools. And in some cases, e.g. large cruisers, sloops, minesweepers and fast escort vessels, the difference between earlier hypothetical figures and the new emergency ones was considerable.⁽⁸⁸⁾

Some reassessment was also needed in the case of merchant ship building, and this was an even more difficult problem. Instead of an annual output of over 1,000,000 tons as planned in 1936 it now looked, in the autumn of 1938, as though the likely figure for 1939 would be no more than 850,000 tons and that for 1940 probably only about 500,000 tons. The trouble was that with the continued laying up of unwanted merchant ships, with new orders insufficient to keep the building yards in operation, and with crews and dockyard labour drifting away, it was doubtful if the necessary labour would be available if and when a sudden increase in production and manning was called for. Certainly it was highly doubtful whether the full merchant ship programme of 1,000,000 tons a year could, in these circumstances, be combined with proposed naval building.⁽⁸⁹⁾

In face of this evidence produced by the Supply Committee there was an investigation into the whole question of the adequacy of the merchant marine for war purposes, resulting in a memorandum considered in detail by the C.I.D. on 24th November 1938. On that occasion both Sir Thomas Inskip and the President of the Board of Trade, Mr. Stanley, expressed grave anxiety. Indeed, the latter told his colleagues that, in his view, there was 'an alarming rate' of decrease in orders for new ships and of increase in the movement of skilled labour away from ships and building yards into other trades.

The crux of the problem was not the availability of ships already built—most of those laid up could be put back into service in an emergency—but our ability to make good war-time losses by new construction during the war itself. Moreover, the picture seemed even blacker when both the First Lord, Lord Stanhope, and the First Sea Lord, Sir Roger Backhouse, argued that war-time losses of merchant ships would very probably be much greater than the estimates recently put forward by the Board of Trade, particularly because of enemy air attacks in coastal waters and on ships actually in harbour. There were, it is true, some compensating factors. For example, neutral shipping could be hired or purchased, steaming times could be speeded up as could time spent on loading and un-

loading. But, however valuable such steps proved, the replacement situation would remain critical. The C.I.D. therefore concluded that it was essential that 'steps should be taken to remedy the merchant shipbuilding position as soon as possible'.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Several methods of attempting to remedy the situation were adopted, steps in which the Admiralty and the Board of Trade acted in co-operation. The Government began to subsidise yards which it wanted to keep in production while the Admiralty began to place orders for patrol vessels and minesweepers with small commercial firms short of work. In addition the Services were advised to plan on a reduced tonnage of merchant ships to be taken up by them in war and to start building some of them for themselves. But these were only partial measures. There was no radical change in methods of labour supply or in the adoption of labour-saving machinery. As a result the war began with little hope that new building could compensate for likely losses.⁽⁹¹⁾

6. *The Fleet Air Arm*

When, in 1923, the Salisbury Committee was set up to examine the overall problems of co-operation between the Army, Navy and Air Force, the special problem of fleet air work was handed over to a small sub-committee under the chairmanship of Lord Balfour.⁽⁹²⁾ The sub-committee found, and left in principle unchanged, an organisation in which the Air Ministry exercised administrative control by raising, training and maintaining the Fleet Air Arm; when actually at sea, that Arm came under the operational and disciplinary control of the Admiralty. All design, production and maintenance matters connected with aircraft carriers were also under Admiralty control, with the Air Ministry responsible for aircraft supply. Finally, naval air policy was the joint responsibility of the Air Staff and the Naval War Staff. The object of the Balfour Report was to improve the working of this system, and its recommendations were expanded in detail in the Trenchard-Keyes agreement of July 1924. The system, so defined, remained in operation until the mid-nineteen-thirties.⁽⁹³⁾

The arrangements thus made were preceded and followed by disagreements, sometimes serious, between the two Services involved. Beneath differences on matters of detail lay a major difference in strategic view. The Admiralty argued that a Fleet Air Arm was

'... as necessary to a fleet as cruisers, destroyers or submarines. Aerial reconnaissance and aerial "spotting" are as strictly naval operations as gunning, torpedo work and wireless telegraphy. It seems to them intolerable that, while they are responsible for the safety and success of our Battle Fleets, the air work on which that safety and that success in large measure depend should be

performed by persons belonging to another Service, imbued by different traditions, and looking for support and promotion to a different Department.'⁽⁹⁴⁾

The Air Ministry, on the other hand, while in no way denying the specialist quality of naval flying, argued that all air forces and flying training should be under one control in order to maximise both administrative and operational efficiency. Any fractioning of forces would almost certainly, in addition to increasing expense, restrict research and, therefore, progress.

During the twelve or thirteen years after the Balfour report, and while the issue of principle remained in hot dispute, it is not surprising that there was continuing disagreement on practical matters, not least that of the selection and training of pilots and, where pilots were concerned, the training as pilots of naval ratings. The two Services had very different traditions in matters of this kind. These particular disputes came to a head in the spring of 1936. On 21st April of that year the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Monsell, wrote to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence urging the latter to conduct an enquiry into the employment of naval rating pilots and into the terms of service of R.A.F. pilots in the Fleet Air Arm.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The First Lord's letter makes it clear that he and the Naval Staff were really concerned with the fundamental issue of dual control of the Fleet Air Arm and claimed that that form of control gravely impaired efficiency. It is equally clear that the Prime Minister, Mr. Baldwin, like his predecessor Mr. MacDonald, was unwilling to reopen a debate theoretically closed by the earlier Balfour report, arguing 'that the mere fact of a fresh inquiry would prove detrimental to the good relations now existing between all three Services, and that we could not afford this at the present time of strain and difficulty'.

As a result of the First Lord's representations a small committee was set up, under the chairmanship of Sir Thomas Inskip, to enquire into the limited subject of recruitment and training of pilots.⁽⁹⁶⁾ This committee met on several occasions during July 1936, and its deliberations were followed, in November of that year, by a report from the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence.⁽⁹⁷⁾ The Minister's detailed recommendations concerning personnel, the period of service for pilots, and reserves need not detain us here. The Air Ministry, though apparently reluctantly, were prepared to accept them. The Admiralty, however, were not satisfied, and the result was that no changes were, in fact, made as a result of the report. Instead, there were further discussions and, persuaded at length that a wide ranging review was now unavoidable, the Prime Minister agreed that a new committee, the Sub-Committee on the Fleet Air

Arm, should be set up with Inskip as chairman and with the Lord Privy Seal, Lord Halifax, and the President of the Board of Education, the Rt. Hon. Oliver Stanley, as members. The new committee was instructed to consider and report upon:

- '(a) The functions of the Fleet Air Arm, particularly in relation to Naval operations and the efficiency of the Navy;
- (b) The functions of other air units (including General Reconnaissance and Flying Boat squadrons) which are required to take part in either naval operations or air operations over the sea;
- (c) The most effective operational use of the aircraft and the best administrative arrangements for the provision, training and control of personnel, for the supply of equipment and of the maintenance of reserves for such air forces.'⁽⁹⁸⁾

In fact, the new committee never met. Instead, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence collected evidence and opinions from the Air Ministry and Admiralty and then examined and discussed this material with the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee.⁽⁹⁹⁾

The main issue of principle at stake between the two Service Departments was, basically, what it always had been. For the Air Ministry, as the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence pointed out, the important question was whether the fighting resources of the country could be better utilised by a system of self-sufficiency of the Services or within some system designed to provide the maximum flexibility in co-operation between them.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ The Air Ministry pinned their faith to the principle of the indivisibility of air operations within the wider indivisibility of defence operations as a whole. Their argument, in other words, was that if large numbers of aircraft were specialised in type, were permanently and exclusively allocated to rôles ancillary to sea and land forces, and were placed in peace as well as war under the control of naval and military authorities, then they would 'not be suitable for use in intrinsically air operations in war, and their transference from one to another form of employment would be more difficult to effect. The total effective air striking power of the country would be thus proportionately reduced'.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Using the example of the likely problems of home defence in a war against Germany the Air Ministry set out to demonstrate the fallacy of the Admiralty's wish to have a specialised Fleet Air Arm entirely under its own control. In such a situation there would undoubtedly be a need for air reconnaissance in the North Sea area for a variety of purposes. But that would not necessarily occur immediately after the outbreak of war nor would all reconnaissance activities necessarily have to be engaged in at the same time; in other words, there

would inevitably be circumstances and periods in which full reconnaissance requirements would not be essential. The threat to our shipping from submarines and surface raiders, for example, might not develop as a critical menace in the early stages of such a war. That being so, it would be wasteful and potentially dangerous to plan for each reconnaissance task individually and on a specialist basis.

'On the other hand' the Air Ministry argument continued, 'the air threat will be immediate and probably at its worst during the first weeks of war. It would therefore constitute an unnecessary, and perhaps fatal, subtraction from our offensive air strength to keep any substantial number of aircraft employed on, or standing by for, reconnaissance operations in connection with a sea-borne threat to our trade which may not develop at all, and which is unlikely to be of vital import compared with the air threat to our national existence.'⁽¹⁰²⁾

The Admiralty's view has already been briefly summarised. It could, as the Minister pointed out, be seen as a contest 'between specialisation which implies the close identification of the naval air units with the Royal Navy on the one hand, and on the other hand the unification of all the country's air forces in order to obtain the advantages which, it is claimed, will accrue therefrom'.⁽¹⁰³⁾ For the Admiralty, the specialist demands in terms of aircraft, personnel recruitment, training and general conditions of service were overwhelmingly important. It was their view that 'the manner of the naval employment of aircraft so fundamentally alters the character of their work, the range of their functions, their general design and the type of equipment carried, as well as the type of training of the personnel, that very considerable anomalies arise in attempting to regard naval air work in the same light as land air work'.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ The air arm had become an 'integral part of the fleet essential to its efficiency', the system of dual control inherited from the Balfour report meant that the 'Navy is, in fact, in a position never before experienced since one of its most important weapons is also its least reliable weapon'.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Finally bad could only become worse with the planned expansion of the Fleet Air Arm in the coming years.

'The system now obtaining', ran the last paragraph of the Admiralty's main memorandum, 'neither covers the proper demarcation of responsibility nor allows proper steps to be taken by the Admiralty for carrying out the Navy's responsibilities. It is clearly the responsibility of the Air Ministry to provide for and undertake action against enemy industrial centres, ports and air bases whether that action be designed to neutralise the menace to our shipping or for any other reason. But the defence

of sea communications, whether the resulting operations involve action on the sea, under the sea or over the sea against enemy forces clearly cannot remain as at present a divided responsibility. It must be the sole responsibility of the Admiralty.'⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

After examining these arguments together with the Chiefs of Staff the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence came to a compromise decision but also one which favoured the Admiralty view far more than the Balfour report had done.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ The Minister made it clear that he was far from convinced of the complete correctness of either the 'maximum of flexibility' argument or of the 'specialisation' one. Indeed, they were not necessarily, in his view, inconsistent. 'The question', he wrote, 'as it presents itself to me, is whether or not unification ought to be rigidly maintained and, if not, how far the exceptions should go. In answering this question it is necessary to consider separately, first the Fleet Air Arm and, secondly, shore-based aircraft.'

There was, the Minister pointed out, no dispute about the Admiralty's operational responsibility for the Fleet Air Arm—subject to Cabinet decision. The actual strategic use of the aircraft of that Arm was not affected by whether administratively they came under the Admiralty or the Air Ministry, provided they were treated operationally as a fixed part of the naval forces. The difficulty lay elsewhere. The Fleet Air Arm was intended not merely to co-operate with the Fleet; it was an integral part of the Fleet. The air unit in a carrier or a capital ship was much more than a passenger in a convenient vehicle; it formed part of the organisation of the ship, and as such, was a factor in that ship's efficiency. The whole *raison d'être* of such an air unit was 'the employment of air power in naval operations'. The Minister went on:

'The Naval Officers primarily concerned with the working of the ship are not only responsible in some degree for the success of the work of the aircraft, but they have to accept a large measure of responsibility for the safety of the crews of the aircraft. I find it impossible to resist the inference that when so much that concerns the air units depends upon the Naval element in the ship and in the Fleet, the Admiralty should be responsible for selecting and training the personnel, and generally for the organisation of the Fleet Air Arm. Again, the work of the Fleet Air Arm with its inevitable naval environment and having regard to the high degree of specialisation in equipment is in my opinion more likely to be efficient if the Admiralty are now made responsible.'⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

Finally, the Minister protested that he intended to cast no doubt upon the wisdom of the decision taken much earlier by the Balfour

Committee. Some important circumstances had changed since 1923. Above all, in so far as the object of prolonging dual control, in 1923, had been inspired by the wish to encourage co-operation between the Services then it should be borne in mind that, in 1937, 'co-operation between the Services is axiomatic and is exhibited in practice so much that it is safe to assume it will not be jeopardised by the transfer of the Fleet Air Arm'. This was a kindly comment on what appears to have been a particularly bitter case of inter-Service rivalry.

The Minister's recommendations on the subject of shore-based aircraft were different. The Admiralty had asked for the specific allocation of 'a certain irreducible minimum of shore-based aircraft' under its own administrative and operational control for such duties as trade defence, coastal or sea reconnaissance, anti-submarine work and local patrols, and attacks on enemy sea-borne forces. The Minister considered this claim in the light of a comprehensive Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee paper on the problem of the protection of sea-borne trade in the event of war with Germany.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ The basic difficulty here was one of resources, in other words, 'the gap between an ideal system of trade defence, so far as aircraft are concerned, and what is practicable'.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ The Air Ministry's argument against locking up aircraft for specialist purposes and so subtracting them from a central pool available for highest priorities at any given moment, an argument which the Minister had rejected in the case of ship-borne aircraft, he now accepted in the case of shore-based units because of the basic difficulty just mentioned. It would not be possible, in war, to allocate enough aircraft to keep every area of the sea simultaneously under continuous observation in war. There was, for example, the competition and strain upon national resources imposed by the plans for the Air Defence of Great Britain. The Minister's conclusion, therefore, was that 'the proper balance between the air forces used in trade defence and those used in defence of Great Britain as well as those required for co-operation with land forces can only be preserved by a continual process of adjustment in consultation between the three Services'. Shore-based aircraft were, therefore, to remain the responsibility of the Air Ministry.⁽¹¹¹⁾

Finally, the detailed working out of these new arrangements, something which the Minister assumed would take a good deal of time, was to be left to inter-Departmental discussions and decisions. The Minister's recommendations were then discussed and approved by the Cabinet at a meeting on 29th July 1937,⁽¹¹²⁾ and announced to the House of Commons the next day⁽¹¹³⁾ in a statement by the Prime Minister. As it turned out, the Minister was proved correct in his estimate that the change-over he recommended would take a long

time to effect; the transfer of the administrative control of the Fleet Air Arm from the Air Ministry to the Admiralty did not take place until May 1939.⁽¹¹⁴⁾

While these investigations were proceeding the Fleet itself, including aircraft carriers, was being built up to the D.R.C. and, in some respects, the new Two-Power standard. Under the limitations of the Washington and 1930 London Naval Treaties British policy had aimed at providing an eventual total of five large aircraft carriers which would accommodate 360 aircraft. Since new construction was limited, the policy since 1930 was to lay down one ship every three years in order to spread the rate of replacement. In fact, only one ship, the *Ark Royal*, had been laid down by 1935. In November 1936 there were 4 carriers in commission accommodating just under 150 aircraft.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Under the impact of the third D.R.C. Review and the emergence of an Admiralty demand for a new standard navy, estimates of aircraft carrier needs increased in proportion to those of other vessels. At first it was assumed that 8 aircraft carriers would be enough;⁽¹¹⁶⁾ then, by 1938 and after the consolidation of the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, the Admiralty estimated its requirements by 1942 as being 4 carriers for Home Waters, 4 for the Far East, and 5 for trade protection, a total of 13.^{(117)*} It was this, a Two-Power standard, which was in fact adopted in the building programmes of 1936 and 1937. In the 1938 programme the Admiralty wanted to continue to build carriers at the same rate as in the two preceding years; the Chancellor opposed new building altogether. A compromise of one was reached, and a further carrier was included in the 1939 programme.

The Admiralty was concerned not only with carriers but also with aircraft. The first Report of the D.R.C. pointed out a serious gap between the Royal Navy and the Japanese Navy in this respect and, even on the most optimistic forecast, predicted some degree of inferiority even in 1938.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ This forecast was confirmed in the Committee's third Report.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ At that time the Royal Navy's strength in aircraft embarked in carriers and catapult ships was less than one half that of the U.S. Navy and less than three quarters of that of Japan. A further review of defence requirements in March 1936 therefore proposed an expansion of the Fleet Air Arm to a first line strength of about 500 aircraft by 31st March 1942, but there was no detailed programme of ways and means of reaching that strength.⁽¹²⁰⁾ By early 1939, and despite a steady carrier building programme, the aircraft and personnel position was, broadly speaking, as bad as ever. In January of that year the First Lord, Lord Stanhope, submitted to the Cabinet a detailed memorandum on the state of the Fleet Air

* See above, Section 4.

Arm.⁽¹²¹⁾ The purpose of his analysis was to illustrate the inadequate state of preparations, and the scale of expansion required to meet the approved programme for the fleet itself including aircraft for carriers now under construction. His main figures were as follows:

'Summary of certain requirements of the Fleet Air Arm on 31st March 1942, and on 31st March 1939, with the Naval resources expected to be available to meet them on 31st March 1939.

Table 10

Estimate of Aircraft and Personnel Requirements for the Fleet Air Arm up to 1942

| | <i>Total Aircraft</i> | <i>R.N. Personnel(b)</i> |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Requirements 31.3.42 | 1,954 | 8,700 |
| Requirements 31.3.39 | 1,400 | 4,530 |
| Resources 31.3.39 | 885(a) | 2,600 |

NOTES

(a) On 31st March 1939 about 1,000 aircraft of various types will be outstanding from current orders with contractors. Peace wastage to 1st April 1942 will total about 500 aircraft.

(b) These are peace requirements of trained personnel only. They exclude Reserves, in process of formation, and trainees.'

The aircraft totals were worked out on the following basis for the already approved 1942 Fleet. A first-line strength of 490 aircraft; an immediate reserve of 100 per cent; 484 aircraft for training purposes; and a war reserve of 490 aircraft producing a final total of 1,954 aircraft by 31st March 1942. Moreover, the Minister added, his figures for currently available aircraft were misleading. Many aircraft shown as available on 31st March 1939 would then be out of date and near the end of their useful life. In fact, the Fleet Air Arm had virtually no fighter aircraft except a handful of obsolete types. Finally the numerical deficiency in torpedo spotter reconnaissance aircraft, 'the backbone of the Fleet Air Arm', was even greater and was not likely to be eliminated until the end of the expansion period.⁽¹²²⁾ When the Cabinet discussed these proposals those concerning war reserves were criticised as being out of step with R.A.F. requirements, and the First Lord was asked to reconsider that part of his memorandum in consultation with other interested Ministers; otherwise his arguments were accepted and his proposals approved.⁽¹²³⁾

The situation was very little improved by the time war broke out. By June 1939 the Skua fighter-dive-bomber was just coming into service, the first trials of the Albacore had only just been completed, while the trials of the Roc two-seater fighter were still going on. A few months earlier the shortage of aircraft for the Fleet Air Arm was so serious that the Air Ministry had agreed to lend the Admiralty 50 unmodified single-seater Gladiator fighters to help fill the gap, but the Gladiator was itself already obsolescent.⁽¹²⁴⁾

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PART III

CHAPTER X

NAVAL STRATEGY: THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND, 1936-39

1. *The Basic Problem of a Three-Front War*

DURING THE CRISIS of 1931-32 in the Far East, at a time when Japan was considered to be the only likely threat at sea to Great Britain and when estimates of the conditions of naval warfare were, therefore, based on the possibility of unilateral war against Japan, the Chiefs of Staff described the opening phase of such a war as follows:

‘The essence of our naval plan would rest on the arrival of our main fleet at Singapore at the earliest possible moment. The Admiralty calculate that . . . a total of thirty-eight days would be required for the fleet to arrive at Singapore and another ten days to reach Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, the Naval Forces from Shanghai would endeavour in the first instance, to disappear into the blue; . . . Later, they would endeavour to harass the enemy convoys carrying the Japanese expeditionary forces. With the exception of submarines and certain other vessels, which might be left at Hong Kong with a view to vigorous offensive operations against Japanese forces in the vicinity, the whole of our naval forces at present in the Far East would be based on Singapore prior to the arrival of the main fleet.

It is clear, therefore, that the security of Singapore is of primary importance in the situation under consideration.’^{(1)*}

* As early as 1919 it had been estimated that, for an offensive Pacific strategy against Japan, the Royal Navy would need a battle fleet at least 50 per cent stronger than that of the Japanese with a large additional number of cruisers and destroyers for trade and troop convoy. If a defensive strategy were to be adopted (and this, from the beginning, seemed the more likely) then, so the Admiralty argued, it would be dangerous to lock up a fleet in Hong Kong. Singapore, because of its safer distance from Japan, would have to be the main base. Further, in such a situation, Hong Kong would either be captured by the Japanese (with serious results for Britain's trade and prestige in China) or its defences would have to be strengthened sufficiently to withstand a long siege. In other words, within a year of the end of the war the outlines of what became the accepted Pacific strategy were already laid down.

Even in 1932 this was, in practice, a largely illusory strategy, since Hong Kong was virtually defenceless, while the defences of Singapore were totally inadequate for meeting a serious attack of any kind. Nonetheless, the strategic principles of the One-Power Standard were clear and, at that time, valid. The size of the Royal Navy was to be based on a calculation which demanded that the British Fleet, wherever situated, should be the equal of any other fleet wherever situated. And since Japan was then regarded as the only likely enemy, a sufficient force was thus required to meet her fleet at its selected moment. There was no positive anxiety about the simultaneous position in European waters; hence the main fleet could safely be despatched to the far side of the earth to deal with the Japanese fleet.

It is not surprising that, from 1932 onwards, the version of One-Power naval standard accepted in the nineteen-twenties gradually proved increasingly unsatisfactory both in view of the new situation in Anglo-Japanese relations produced by the Manchurian crisis and of the steadily worsening international scene in Europe. The despatch of the main fleet to the Far East could no longer be regarded with equanimity in face of the increasing danger of finding an enemy in Europe at the same time.⁽²⁾ The basic limitations of the One-Power Standard for Britain's purposes were, first, that it might well not afford a sufficient margin of strength between the power on which the standard was calculated and the next strongest naval power should naval warfare have to be waged against both simultaneously and, second, that such a situation would be made worse by the need for simultaneous operations in widely separated theatres. This was the problem of distribution which had caused the Admiralty so much anxiety at the turn of the century and which had been solved then not by a new standard of naval strength but by an alliance with Japan which, in practice, handed over to the ally responsibility for one of the theatres. In the nineteen-thirties no comparable alliance was possible: a larger navy seemed the only option unless, of course, the problem could be solved in other ways, for example by converting a potential enemy into at least a neutral if not a friend.

These issues were analysed in some detail both by the Chiefs of Staff and by the D.R.C. during 1935. In the spring of that year, in their annual review of national and imperial defence prepared with special reference to the forthcoming meeting of Dominion Prime Ministers, the Chiefs of Staff emphasised that treaty limitations and the need for economy had greatly reduced the comparative strength of the Royal Navy, and to such an extent that national security was seriously jeopardised.⁽³⁾ The current concept of naval strategy in what was considered the likeliest major war still involved the despatch to the Far East of a fleet adequate in size and composition to meet

that of Japan, together with cruiser protection to ensure the security of sea communications behind the fleet. But the carrying out of this strategy would leave Britain with a naval strength in European Waters inferior to that of the strongest European naval power. Admittedly that power, in 1935 was France; and France, it was assumed, would be Britain's ally—or certainly not her enemy—in a major war. On the other hand, French naval strength might be matched or even surpassed by that of another European nation with interests and policies opposed to those of Britain, and in those circumstances the inadequacy of the One-Power Standard would be exposed.

'In fact,' wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'the ability of the One-Power Standard to satisfy our strategical needs is dependent upon a sufficient margin between the strength of the one power on which the standard is calculated, and the strength of the next strongest naval power. The existing margin is only sufficient on the supposition that France will not be our enemy in Europe and that we are not without allies.'

It has already been pointed out that the Anglo-German naval agreement of June 1935 only just conformed to this calculation (given the Washington and London treaty ratios), and included no margin beyond that, either to allow for engaging Germany and Japan simultaneously at opposite sides of the world, or for the emergence of a third potential naval enemy.

These weaknesses—existing treaty arrangements governing Britain's naval strength in relation to other Powers—had become apparent by the autumn of 1935 when the members of the D.R.C. prepared their third report. The standard of naval strength recommended by the D.R.C. for the short-term was what had become the amended and generally accepted version of the One-Power, and now became known as the D.R.C. Standard.* But however 'accepted' this D.R.C. Standard might have become by the autumn of 1935 it was still unsatisfactory in a situation in which two major naval powers, both rapidly modernising old, or building new vessels, might have to be engaged simultaneously and that in theatres 10,000 miles apart. So long as the Versailles Treaty was in effective operation it would have been possible to make the necessary 'redispositions' envisaged by the D.R.C. formula 'to meet an emergency arising out of difficulties with Germany while still maintaining a strong defensive in the Far East', on the assumption that Germany herself would begin the war with a defensive naval strategy. That assumption could no longer be made. Even before 1935, Germany had begun to

* See above, Chapter VII, Section 4.

break loose from the restrictions of Versailles. The Anglo-German naval agreement had formally recognised that situation. In the view of the D.R.C., what was needed in the long-term was a Two-Power Standard navy capable of maintaining simultaneously a strong defensive fleet in the Far East, and a fleet in home waters able to deal with a resurgent Germany even, if necessary, without there being time for 'redistributions' upon which the Royal Navy had counted hitherto.⁽⁴⁾

Commenting some years later on the suggested Two-Power Standard, and particularly with reference to its provision for operations in the Far East, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence pointed out that, when the D.R.C. report was drawn up in the autumn of 1935,

'The view was strongly held in many quarters that as the British Fleet could never by itself carry out offensive operations which could be militarily effective against Japan, the Admiralty intention to send a fleet to the Far East in the event of war with Japan was unsound. The Naval Staff, however, held firmly to the view which was shared by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, that the rôle of the Fleet in the Far East was not designed to seize control of the Sea of Japan, but rather to provide a defensive "fleet-in-being," so that before Japan could attack our main Imperial interests she would have first to defeat our Fleet under disadvantageous conditions.'⁽⁵⁾*

There can be no doubt that Lord Chatfield was correct in his account of Admiralty plans. But the 'defensive fleet-in-being' he spoke of was still a major battle fleet, as was the fleet designed to deal with Germany in home waters.

The Two-Power Standard, as we have seen,[†] was not adopted even in principle before war broke out in September 1939, although building programmes from 1936 onwards were to some extent based on its scales. But since the considerably less satisfactory D.R.C. Standard could itself not be achieved by 1939 the new standard was bound to be no more than a hope for the future, thus leaving unsolved problems of priority and strategic distribution which still remained when war broke out. And as if that was not bad enough, the basic problems of British naval strategy were made yet more difficult, even as the D.R.C. prepared their final report in the autumn of 1935, by the emergence of Italy as a potential enemy athwart the shortest line of communication between the Atlantic

* Lord Chatfield was now Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, having earlier been First Sea Lord.

† See above, Chapter IX.

and Singapore. If the virtually unattainable (in pre-1939 terms) Two-Power Standard was sufficient only for a simultaneous war against Germany and Japan, it was inconceivable that Britain could build a yet larger navy to cope with yet another, and that a not inconsiderable, enemy at sea. No wonder, therefore, that the D.R.C. report of November 1935, looked to 'policy' i.e. diplomacy, to achieve what purely military plans and preparations seemed unable to do.

'Our defence requirements,' so the report ran, 'are so serious that it would be materially impossible, within the period with which the Report deals, to make additional provision for the case of a hostile Italy.'⁽⁶⁾

It was therefore vital to try to develop 'an appropriate policy . . . in the international field' to keep Italy neutral if not positively friendly. And despite undoubted changes in emphasis in strategic plans—and some of these will be discussed later in this chapter—that remained the view both of the Cabinet and of the Chiefs of Staff down to the outbreak of war. Nor, in the matter of 'policy' did the third D.R.C. report stop there. The same danger of a war on several fronts suggested, where Japan also was concerned, 'the importance of an ultimate policy of accommodation and neighbourliness.'^{(7)*}

In so far as appeasement implied an attempt to lighten what was considered to be an unbearable burden of preparations for war against three major enemies simultaneously by trying to get on better terms with one or more of them, it was a policy of particular relevance to plans for naval strategy as they were developed during the last three or four years before the war. If, in fact, the worst came about, then naval operations would be of critical importance in all theatres, and were regularly considered by the Chiefs of Staff on that assumption. It was somewhat different with the Army and the Royal Air Force. It is true that plans for land and sea operations in North Africa became of increasing importance from 1936 onwards, and that largely because of fear of the inability of the Royal Navy to continue to operate in the eastern Mediterranean in certain circumstances.[†] On the other hand, by the winter of 1937-38 the Army's rôle in war was defined virtually to exclude the vital European theatre, while the Royal Air Force, at the same time, was preparing for war very largely in terms of operations against Germany. For most of the period under review in this volume neither the Army nor the Royal Air Force anticipated heavy commitments in the Far East in a war against Japan. To that extent the military case

* See above, pp. 256-57.

† e.g. see below, p. 421.

for appeasement was bound to seem more urgent for the Navy than for the other two Services.

One other point should be borne in mind. At least, from the time of the D.R.C. Report of November 1935, it was considered that, while the establishment of friendly relations with Germany on a durable basis was as strategically desirable as with any other country, nevertheless such a policy presented greater difficulties than a similar one towards Japan and Italy. Policy deliberately planned to reduce the dangers of a three front war is, as a result, to be seen more clearly in relation to the latter powers than to Germany, and naval planning reflected that order. Therefore, and admittedly at the cost of some diversion, it is worth examining the attempts to get on to better terms with Italy and Japan before going on to deal in detail with naval plans.

2. *The Mediterranean: Anglo-Italian Relations, 1936-37*

By the summer of 1936 the Abyssinian crisis was past. But the Mediterranean became again, and almost immediately, a danger zone with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July of that year.

Revolt against the Republican Government broke out in Spain during the night of 18th-19th July. Issues of considerable strategic importance were involved, particularly with the anticipated and soon realised danger of foreign intervention. The balance of power in the western Mediterranean was directly related to control over the Straits of Gibraltar and the Balearic Islands. Strategic issues were also involved in the Atlantic where Spanish territory debouched on to the seaboard in the Iberian peninsular itself, in the area of the Canary Islands, two enclaves adjoining the West African coast, and in the area of Fernando Po and the Guinea coast. If Italy or Germany could obtain some control over some or all of these territories then their ability to threaten the interests of France and Britain would be greatly increased; between them they might well be able, in the event of war, to interrupt communications between France and Britain and their respective overseas territories. If Italy and Germany could acquire a hold on Spain herself, they then could encircle France. Finally, there were Spain's raw materials, particularly iron ore and pyrites. In 1935 Britain obtained 25 per cent and 66 per cent respectively of her total imports of these commodities from Spain.⁽⁸⁾

From the beginning the governments of France and Britain were guided, in their attitudes to events in Spain and to the possible intervention in these events by outside Powers, by an overriding anxiety to avoid developments likely to involve themselves in war. On 1st August the French Council of Ministers decided to make an immediate appeal to Britain and Italy for 'the rapid adoption and

rigid observance of an agreed arrangement for non-intervention in Spain.' Then, on 15th August, the French and British governments exchanged declarations in which they recorded their decision to refrain from all interference, direct or indirect, in Spanish affairs, and also announced their prohibition of war supplies to Spanish territory. By the end of August most European powers, including Germany, Italy and Russia had declared their support for the main lines of the Anglo-French policy and in early September a Non-Intervention Committee began work in London.

In the meantime other significant developments were taking shape. For some months there had been signs, not least in the number of visits exchanged between leaders of the two countries, of an Italian rapprochement with Germany. Then, towards the end of October 1936, Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, visited Germany where he saw his opposite number, von Neurath, and also the Führer. A few days later, on 1st November, Mussolini announced a new Italo-German entente which he described as a 'vertical line between Rome and Berlin, . . . not a partition but rather an axis round which all European states animated by the will to collaboration and peace can also collaborate'.⁽⁹⁾ The British Ambassador in Rome, Sir Eric Drummond, who had not shown undue alarm during the weeks preceding Ciano's trip to Germany continued, after the public announcement of the Axis, to express the belief that Mussolini genuinely wanted to be on friendly terms with Britain. So far as the Mediterranean specifically was concerned, the Ambassador believed that Mussolini's main preoccupation was an understanding with Britain and that Hitler had made it clear he was not going to be dragged into any conflict in that area.⁽¹⁰⁾ What became known much later was that, on 21st October in Berlin, Ciano and von Neurath signed a secret protocol dealing with Spain in which it was agreed that Italy and Germany would make arrangements for a joint military effort in that country, for recognition of General Franco after the fall of Madrid (believed to be imminent), and for the prevention of the establishment of a Catalan state.⁽¹¹⁾

The belief of the British Ambassador that Italy genuinely wanted an understanding with Britain was soon put to the test. In the same speech as that in which he announced the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis, Mussolini made a truculent peace offer to Britain.

'If for others the Mediterranean is a route, for us Italians it is life. We do not propose to interrupt it, but we expect, on the other hand, that our vital rights and interests shall be respected. It is necessary that the thinking minds in the British Empire should realise that the fact is accomplished and inevitable. A bilateral clash is not to be thought of, and much less a clash that, from being bilateral, would immediately become European.'

Consequently there is only one solution; a sincere, rapid and complete agreement based on the recognition of reciprocal interests.'⁽¹²⁾

On 4th November the Cabinet in London discussed Mussolini's new move at two meetings, deciding on the terms of the reply to him to be made by the Foreign Secretary in the House and asking the latter to 'adopt a policy of improving relations with Italy' in the light of the views expressed by Ministers. These views were influenced—in particular in the case of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence and the First Lord—by the recently expressed opinion of the Chiefs of Staff of the importance to our military position of improved relations with Italy, and there was a general desire 'to get rid of the Abyssinian question' by recognising the Italian conquest. The Foreign Secretary himself, while agreeing in principle to trying to improve things, thought it necessary to go cautiously and subsequently asked the Cabinet to note that a number of the proposals made by Ministers could hardly be carried into effect. He did not specify recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, but he did say there was little possibility that our relations with Italy could be sufficiently improved to justify a reduction in our armaments in the Mediterranean.^{(13)*}

On 5th November Mr. Eden replied to Signor Mussolini in the House of Commons. This speech, the substance of which was reaffirmed by the Prime Minister at the Lord Mayor's banquet and by the Lord Privy Seal in the House of Lords, paved the way for further diplomatic exchanges:

'We do not challenge Signor Mussolini's word that for Italy "the Mediterranean is her very life," but we affirm that freedom of communication in these waters is also a vital interest, in a full sense of the word, to the British Commonwealth of Nations. Consequently we take note of, and welcome, the assurances that Signor Mussolini gives that Italy does not mean to threaten this route nor propose to interrupt it. Nor do we. Our position is the same. I repeat the assurance that we have no desire to threaten, or intention to attack, any Italian interest in the Mediterranean.'⁽¹⁴⁾

A few days later Mussolini expanded his ideas in a press interview—later confirmed by Signor Grandi, the Italian Ambassador in London—in which he suggested a 'Gentlemen's Agreement' rather than a more formal undertaking between the two countries. And the Foreign Secretary received from the Cabinet authority to continue negotiations on these lines.⁽¹⁵⁾

* The Cabinet referred only briefly and in very general terms to the views of the Chiefs of Staff. These are dealt with in more detail in Chapter XI, Section 1.

Up till now, although there had been an exchange of views with our Ambassador in Rome, the Foreign Office had not considered in much detail the form the 'Gentlemen's Agreement' might take, preferring to await the result of the Italian Ambassador's visit home. However, after Eden and Grandi had met on 25th November, detailed instructions were sent to the British Ambassador in Rome to accept Ciano's suggestion for a general talk on Anglo-Italian relations as a preliminary step to an understanding on the Mediterranean area as a whole. The Ambassador was to bear in mind that it was the Italians and not ourselves who had asked for a clarification of the Mediterranean situation, that nothing was to be done to the detriment of France and no offence given to any other Mediterranean Power. Subject to all this, he was to aim for the formulation of a draft declaration on common interests in the Mediterranean, to be accompanied or followed by further understandings 'for the removal of the causes of friction in the various spheres where Anglo-Italian relations do not necessarily coincide'. This declaration was to be in as general terms as possible, following the lines of Mr. Eden's statement in the House, and might well take the form of an exchange of notes for later publication. In meeting Count Ciano's desire for a general review, the Ambassador should discourage any hopes the Italian Foreign Minister might have—if he had any—that there was scope for substantial concessions to Italy.⁽¹⁶⁾

Discussions then followed more or less on these lines and, on 2nd January 1937, an Agreement was signed announcing that—

'His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Italian Government;

Animated by the desire to contribute increasingly, in the interests of the general cause of peace and security, to the betterment of relations between them and between all the Mediterranean Powers and resolved to respect the rights and interests of those Powers;

Recognise that the freedom of entry into, exit from, and transit through, the Mediterranean is a vital interest both to the different parts of the British Empire and to Italy, and that these interests are in no way inconsistent with each other;

Disclaim any desire to modify or, so far as they are concerned, to see modified, the status quo as regards National Sovereignty of Territories in the Mediterranean area.

Undertake to respect each other's rights and interests in the said area;

Agree to use their best endeavours to discourage any activities liable to impair the good relations which it is the object of the present declaration to consolidate;

This declaration is designed to further the ends of peace and is not directed against any other Power.'⁽¹⁷⁾

In deciding on these moves in their policy towards Italy the Cabinet had so far considered Britain's strategic position only very generally. But behind the scenes it was very different. During discussions in the summer of 1936, on whether or not to continue the guarantees originally given to Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia during the Abyssinian war, the Foreign Secretary had written a paper on the problems facing us in the Mediterranean as a result of that crisis. He emphasised that the whole of our position in the Mediterranean and Middle East had hitherto been largely assured by unchallenged and, as it was thought, unchallengeable sea power. Recent events had placed in doubt our capacity and even our determination to maintain our predominant position in the Mediterranean; consequently, profound misgivings and hesitations had been manifested in Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Egypt, Arabia and Palestine which would spread even further afield unless something was done to stop them. Although he thought Italy would certainly prove much less formidable an antagonist than Germany or Japan, and although he did not want to imply that an ultimate friendly agreement with Italy was impossible, nevertheless Mr. Eden did consider the state of affairs such that it was only prudent that we should consider insuring ourselves against possible risks. There were three courses open to us:— the permanent increase of our naval forces and strengthening of naval bases, an agreement with Italy, or a system of defence in collaboration with other countries who felt themselves threatened by Italy too. If the first of these was thought insufficient by itself and the second impracticable in present circumstances, then we were led inevitably to consider a restricted agreement under League auspices between Britain, Turkey and Greece. The Cabinet liked this last possibility sufficiently to ask the Chiefs of Staff—who had already reacted strongly against any new Mediterranean commitments—to consider and report on it.⁽¹⁸⁾

The Chiefs of Staff report, although completed at the end of July, was not discussed by the Cabinet until 2nd September 1936. It argued against the acceptance of any new military commitments, although it did not preclude a purely diplomatic arrangement between all the Mediterranean Powers. The important thing was to restore those friendly relations with Italy on which the security of Britain's position in the Mediterranean rested: nothing should be allowed to prejudice that. Subject to that condition, anything else that could be done to revert to a peaceful situation in that area would be an advantage strategically. In particular, it was important to be on friendly terms with both Greece and Turkey. It was assumed

that, if we were at war against Italy, there would be no effective League action and that all other countries, except Egypt and Iraq, would remain neutral; on the other hand, the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty did provide for a British garrison in Egypt and, in war-time, for the use of ports, airfields and communications. In the past we had relied on our ability to concentrate a major fleet in the Mediterranean but had aimed at an army and air force strength of the minimum necessary for internal security and emergency defence. But with Italy hostile, the threat of aggression might flare up suddenly and we might not be able to reinforce Egypt through the Mediterranean in the early weeks of a war. Unless, therefore, we had done so before the outbreak we would be faced with a difficult situation (especially as there might be internal disturbances) which the use of the alternative Cape route would not much diminish. At present, naval operations would be made more difficult by the fact that, of the two existing naval bases, Gibraltar was too far from the eastern Mediterranean, and Malta—which was inadequately defended—was too near Italian air bases. In fact, if we were to be able to face a war in the Mediterranean we must have another base in the eastern Mediterranean even though, wherever the site chosen (and Cyprus was in mind) Italian aircraft could reach it. The prospect was not encouraging. Unless able to bring her main fleet to action, we would find it difficult to bring any pressure to bear on Italy for a considerable time. At best our forces would be on the defensive and we should have to count on holding on to our position until the strain of war affected Italy seriously. Since we could not, single-handed, exert decisive economic pressure, this might well be a long time. If we were already at war either in western Europe or the Far East, we should *a fortiori* be forced to confine ourselves to a very limited defensive in the Mediterranean. But in a war in western Europe we should probably be allied with France whose direct co-operation (and this also applied if she came into a purely Mediterranean war) would mean that the Franco-Italian frontier would become the main theatre of land and air operations. Finally the Joint Planning Staff's Report concluded by drawing attention to the dangers of too many enemies. If the risk of Italian aggression in the Mediterranean was liable to continue indefinitely, our whole defence programme would have to be recast.⁽¹⁹⁾

Both the Cabinet and the C.I.D. noted this report with the minimum of discussion, and the Foreign Office suggestion of an agreement with Greece and Turkey was not taken further.⁽²⁰⁾ There seemed to be some promise of an improvement in our defences with a visit of the First Lord to the Mediterranean in August and September. Reporting to the Cabinet after his return he mentioned

plans for dealing with deficiencies at Malta and also for providing an airfield at Gibraltar. Proposals to make use of Cyprus were also under consideration.⁽²¹⁾ Very little, however, seems to have been achieved by the visit. Indeed, even as late as June 1937, the C.I.D. decided to postpone a decision on the vital problem of an east Mediterranean base until the completion of a Chiefs of Staff review of the Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa, and until Ministers had reconsidered the general assumptions governing defence preparations in the Mediterranean.⁽²²⁾

Meanwhile, on 24th February 1937, the Cabinet approved a new definition by the C.I.D. of Italy's rôle in our defence preparations. Until the Abyssinian war the assumption on the basis of which programmes for the defences of ports abroad were calculated, made no provision for defence against attack by Italy provided such defences did not fall so far behind that they could not be brought to a suitable standard if political changes made this necessary. Early in 1936, however, the C.I.D. had approved new estimates of scales of attack which included in certain cases the possibility of war with Italy. But the earlier general assumption remained and was now proving of some difficulty in relation to the defences of ports in the Mediterranean and Red Sea, in particular those for Malta. After some discussion, therefore, the C.I.D. recommended, and the Cabinet approved—

'(i) That Italy could not be counted as a reliable friend, nor yet in present circumstances a probable enemy.

(ii) That no very large expenditure need therefore be incurred on defences at Mediterranean and Red Sea ports but that all the same something should be done to bring them up to date and make them more efficient.'⁽²³⁾

This was clearly little more than a repetition of the view of the D.R.C. that, since it would be 'materially impossible' to make provision for a hostile Italy in addition to preparations for war against Germany and Japan, then what was not practicable was not necessary.*

3. *The Mediterranean: Anglo-Italian Relations 1938-39*

Neither the Non-Intervention Committee nor the 'Gentlemen's Agreement' worked, from Britain's point of view, as well as some had hoped. So far as the Non-Intervention Committee was con-

* See above, p. 379.

cerned the volunteer problem proved difficult enough; but when to that were added unprovoked bombing and submarine attacks on neutral vessels, both in the Mediterranean and off the Spanish Atlantic coast, it is hardly surprising that the Committee's activities had reached a state of deadlock by the summer of 1937. This crisis was made all the worse by a growing tendency on Mussolini's part to abandon any pretence of Italian non-intervention in Spain, a tendency culminating in his message to General Franco on the fall of Santander in late August in which he openly extolled the part played by Italian volunteers. While on the one hand determined to protect their nationals and their property, the governments of France and Britain were equally determined, as ever, to do their best to prevent these events from developing into general war. On 5th September, therefore, the two governments issued a joint invitation to ten countries—Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Egypt, Albania, Russia and Roumania—to a conference at the Swiss town of Nyon in order to 'end the present state of insecurity in the Mediterranean and to ensure that all rules of international law regarding shipping at sea shall be strictly enforced.' The conference met on 10th September, although at first without the Axis powers. By 14th September an agreement had been reached and signed. A system of patrols was arranged to come into effect immediately, and by the end of the month Italy had joined in. The new arrangements limited, though they did not entirely stop air attacks, and proved effective in dealing with submarines.

Direct Anglo-Italian relations are more important for our purposes. The agreement of January 1937 was followed by a period of several months during which the two countries not merely failed to get closer together but, on the contrary, drifted further apart. At the first meeting of the Defence Plans (Policy) Sub-Committee^{(24)*} on 19th April Mr. Eden argued that the danger from Italy as defined in February needed reassessment.† A little later he set out his views at greater length. The dominant motives of Italy's policy, he suggested, could spring only from a preoccupation with the restraints upon her freedom of action implied by Britain's control of entry into and exit from the Mediterranean; phrases such as those used in the 'Gentlemen's Agreement' were insufficient in themselves to do anything to modify that policy which, in its whole trend, showed clear evidence of ill-will towards us. Italy might well wait to attack us until we were heavily engaged elsewhere; but it was just possible that we might find ourselves at war with Italy first, in which case Germany would

* From now on referred to as D.P.(P), the members at its first meeting on 19th April 1937 being: Baldwin (Chairman), N. Chamberlain, Eden, Hoare, Simon, Duff Cooper, Viscount Swinton, Inskip, the Chiefs of Staff, Hankey (Sec.).

† See above, p. 386.

probably take advantage of the favourable opportunity to join in. In any case we ought to be prepared. He therefore asked for a Chiefs of Staff report on our present ability to cope with a war against Italy and on what would be needed to bring our forces at the state necessary to ensure her defeat and prevent a combination of Italy and Germany against us. Further, he asked that the present formula dealing with the matter of defence preparations against Italy be amended to read that 'Italy cannot be regarded as a reliable friend and must for an indefinite period be regarded as a possible enemy'.⁽²⁵⁾

These matters were discussed at two meetings of the C.I.D. held in early July 1937. By no means everyone agreed with the Foreign Secretary's assessment. Some argued that there was no urgency, others that it was useless to change the formula about Italy since we could not afford, for a long time, to take measures in the Mediterranean adequate to cope with a situation in which Italy would actually be at war against us simultaneously with Germany and Japan. In the end the Committee followed the lead of the new Prime Minister, Mr. Chamberlain. He did not deny that relations between Italy and Britain had worsened. On the other hand he considered a unilateral war against her 'unthinkable'. It was decided, therefore, to class Italy no longer as 'a reliable friend' against whom no defence preparations need to be undertaken; on the other hand priority in defensive preparations in Europe should be given to the provision of a deterrent to aggression by Germany. In practice this meant that no large expenditure was to be permitted on the defences of Mediterranean and Red Sea ports even though steps should be taken to make them more efficient.⁽²⁶⁾

It is probably not exaggerating to see here the first sign of that split between the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister which led to the resignation of the former in February 1938.⁽²⁷⁾ This impression is heightened by those moves which led to an interview between the Prime Minister and the Italian ambassador on 27th July, followed by an exchange of friendly messages between the two heads of state in which Chamberlain said that his government was 'activated only by the most friendly feelings towards Italy' and ready at any time to enter upon talks to clear up any misunderstanding.⁽²⁸⁾ Writing to his sisters on 1st August Chamberlain implied that the Foreign Office were 'jealous' of him and says that, for his part, he had no desire to take credit from Eden and intended now to put the Foreign Secretary back 'in the foreground again'.⁽²⁹⁾

Mussolini's reply was received early in August. The Duce welcomed the overtures made to him and agreed with the suggestion that there should be talks to examine and attempt to solve issues still in dispute between the two countries.⁽³⁰⁾

It was not until after Chamberlain and Mussolini had exchanged

letters that the Chiefs of Staff were brought in detail into the story. At the request of the Foreign Office they discussed some military aspects of the proposed talks on two occasions during August and September; but, in contrast to the Foreign Office which regarded exploration of military issues as a necessary prelude to political appeasement, the Chiefs of Staff argued that there was little point in discussing military topics until a political understanding with Italy had been achieved. In general, the views of the Chiefs of Staff were in line with those of the Prime Minister.⁽³¹⁾ In the event, however, there was virtually no advance towards an understanding of any kind during the remainder of that year.

Nonetheless, there were occasional signs that Mussolini was still prepared to talk, and these signs became more hopeful in early February 1938 simultaneously with warnings of the forthcoming Anschluss between Germany and Austria.* On 18th February the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary saw the Italian Ambassador in London and it soon became clear that a break in the British Cabinet was inevitable. The Prime Minister seems to have been willing to trust Italian promises for the future, both about Spain and Abyssinia; the Foreign Secretary thought some Italian action, in addition to promises, was the essential pre-requisite to general conciliatory talks. At first both Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary tried to reassure their colleagues by claiming that their differences were those of method, not of principle. But even that fiction had soon to be discarded. The fact was that, for some time past, the Foreign Secretary had been advocating a stronger line towards the dictators than was acceptable to his chief and to his colleagues, and his threatened, then actual resignation did not break up what was, in practice, an overwhelming balance of opinion in favour of the Prime Minister's approach. Mr. Eden resigned and, on 25th February, Lord Halifax was announced as his successor. On 16th April the Anglo-Italian agreement was signed in Rome including a reaffirmation of the January 1937 declaration of friendship together with notes on agreements concerning Spain and Abyssinia, and on some other areas of common interest in the Middle East.†

The details of the developing disagreement between Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary are not our business here. What is relevant is that the Prime Minister's approach tallied with the

* In mid-January 1938 President Roosevelt suggested a plan for a world conference to discuss the causes of current international tension, a proposal which was, in effect, rejected by the Cabinet and the Prime Minister although strongly supported by the Foreign Secretary. What this episode did was to highlight and strengthen differences of opinion between Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Eden, particularly over the question of *de jure* recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia.⁽³²⁾

† The Agreement consisted of proposals, but ratification depended upon evidence that these proposals were being acted upon; see below, pp. 390-91.

continuing anxiety of the Chiefs of Staff to achieve a political understanding with at least one of our potential enemies since it was taken for granted that it would be impossible to face all three in war together. This coincidence was made clear on more than one occasion in the six months before Mr. Eden resigned. True, the Prime Minister did not explicitly base his negotiations with Mussolini on military arguments; nor did the Chiefs of Staff rank Italy and the Mediterranean theatre third in order of strategic priority simply because negotiations with her were in train. There was, however, at the very least a tacit agreement that an understanding with Italy was more possible than with either of the other two potential enemies, and also that the risks implied in a bargain with her were more acceptable.

In fact, the Anglo-Italian Agreement of April 1938 was no more obviously effective than the Gentlemen's Agreement of the previous year; indeed, formal completion of it remained in abeyance throughout the summer of 1938. In the aftermath of Munich, however, it seemed to the British Government that the most promising hope of improving relations with the Axis lay through Italy and, where Italy was concerned, that the first step in improving relations was to bring the April Agreement actually into force. By that Agreement Italy promised her full adherence to the formula, adopted by the Non-Intervention Committee in November 1937 but not yet in operation, for the proportional withdrawal of volunteers in Spain, and pledged herself to the application of a formula to be determined by the Non-Intervention Committee. In return Britain had agreed to raise the issue of the recognition of Italian sovereignty in Abyssinia at the Council of the League of Nations. In fulfilment of this undertaking the Foreign Secretary obtained from the League Council on 12th May 1938 an implied assent to his suggestion that past action by the League over the Abyssinian affair did not constitute a binding obligation on its member states to withhold recognition of Italy's position until a unanimous decision had been reached.⁽³³⁾

The way was now clear to give Italy the recognition she wanted over Abyssinia as soon as she made positive moves about volunteers in Spain. The latter issue hung fire throughout the whole of the summer of 1938, and only after the Munich crisis was a compromise reached which, in the short-term at any rate, appeared acceptable to both sides. In mid-October some Italian volunteers were withdrawn from Spain and more withdrawals promised. France recognised the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, and General Franco had already announced that Spain would remain neutral in the event of a European war. On 26th October the Cabinet in London was advised by the Foreign Office that Spanish affairs need no longer be reckoned a menace to peace and decided to bring the April agree-

ment into force.⁽³⁴⁾ In mid-November formal ratification was completed by the Governments of the two countries.⁽³⁵⁾

Part of the bait offered to Mr. Chamberlain to conclude these formalities was a suggestion from Mussolini that the Prime Minister might visit Rome,⁽³⁶⁾ a suggestion which the Prime Minister clearly wished to accept.⁽³⁷⁾ An unexpected obstacle arose with a violent claim to Tunis, Corsica and Jibuti made in the Italian Chamber of Deputies on the last day of November 1938, and it was not until mid-January that Chamberlain and Halifax went to Rome. Both before, during and after the visit it would seem that the Prime Minister was more optimistic than his Foreign Secretary, and the latter's view was by now more representative of general Cabinet thinking. In Rome the two leaders confined themselves to generalities. Back in London even the Prime Minister had to admit what mattered most, that Mussolini had proved loyal to Hitler and showed no sign of ability or willingness to try to moderate the latter's ambitions. On the other hand, if prospects of peace were enhanced simply by keeping open the line with Rome, then perhaps something useful had been accomplished.⁽³⁸⁾

In other words, by the beginning of 1939 the British government, and the Prime Minister in particular, had for two and a half years consistently pursued the objective of getting back to the condition of friendly relations with Italy which had been interrupted by the Abyssinian war. Neither Ministers nor Chiefs of Staff considered it feasible to plan for a war on three fronts against Germany, Japan and Italy simultaneously. Italy was thought to be the most likely to respond to attempts at a political *détente* and also militarily the weakest and least threatening of our three potential enemies. Defence preparations designed to cope with the risks of war against Italy were therefore, after the end of the Abyssinian crisis, deliberately and thankfully kept to a minimum. The implications of this policy for naval strategy will be examined later in this chapter.*

But from the spring of 1939 there was a distinct even though not a complete change. In mid-March Germany invaded the rump of Czechoslovakia. On 7th April Italian forces invaded Albania. British guarantees were given to Poland, later to Greece and Rumania and, in mid-May Britain and Turkey issued a declaration of common interests and policies in the eastern Mediterranean designed to fill the gap before the signature of a treaty.† From now on the details of a possible war against Italy became a subject of much more active planning, with important consequences for all three Services and, not least, the Royal Navy. Fears that Italy could

* See below, Section 4.

† See below, Chapter XVIII, for a fuller discussion of these events.

not be a friend after all, formed the most obvious and general reason for this change. But there were other reasons and more specific military ones.

Already, in February 1939, the Chiefs of Staff in their major European Appreciation had emphasised the importance they attached 'to the military advantages to be derived from having Turkey and Greece as our allies in war against Germany and Italy'.^{(39)*} and, in April a strong committee of Ministers endorsed that view.^{(40)†} From now onwards the potential value of a Balkan and east Mediterranean front was an important consideration in strategic planning. This emphasis was further strengthened once Staff talks began with the French in the spring of 1939.‡ In the three phase war envisaged in those talks it was decided that offensive preparations against Italy, as the weaker partner in the Axis, could and therefore should be undertaken before offensive operations against Germany, and detailed plans were drawn up for that purpose, plans going well beyond anything considered previously. For the French the Mediterranean was a more important theatre than the Far East, and British plans slowly conformed to that order of priority. Finally, it was obvious that guarantees given to Balkan and Mediterranean countries made sense only in the context of detailed Allied plans for those areas. For all these reasons the last six months before the war witnessed preparations for a possible war against Italy which were unlike anything seen since the crisis winter of 1935-36.

But if the strategic picture had changed, the political component of appeasement, where Italy was concerned, did so much less. The fact was that the British Government was faced, as it continued to be until June 1940, with a conflict between the need to prepare for war against Italy—if she chose to go to war—and the need to do nothing to provoke that choice. On balance it was better to encourage Italy to remain neutral. Official British reaction to the invasion of Albania made that clear immediately. The day after the invasion on 8th April, 1939, there was an emergency meeting of Ministers when the Prime Minister was away in Scotland. The attitude of Ministers was quite different from that shown immediately after the German entry into Prague three weeks earlier. While the need for agreement with Greece and Turkey had admittedly been strengthened, it was equally clear that there was a general wish for caution lest relations with Mussolini be jeopardised. The whole trend of the meeting was summed up in the remark of Sir John Simon that 'it seemed clear that the present juncture did not justify us in taking steps which would result in a European war'.‡ Of course there were doubts and warnings, not least

* See below, Chapter XVII, Section 2.

† See below, Chapter XVII, Section 3.

‡ The minutes of this meeting are enclosed in the series of normal Cabinet conclusions.

of the consequences of an Italian attack on Greece. Nonetheless, Lord Halifax assured the Italian Chargé d'Affaires that the British Government continued to attach great importance to the Agreement of April 1938, and had no intention of doing anything to impede the course of peace even though the invasion of Albania seemed difficult to reconcile with the terms of the Agreement of the previous year.⁽⁴¹⁾ This line of argument was, with a complementary reaffirmation of intention to negotiate from strength, reproduced by the Prime Minister in the House on 13th April and was not seriously contested.⁽⁴²⁾ Nor was the British government alone in this respect. Mr. Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia, had already made it clear that he was worried about the hostile attitude of France towards Italy; he thought a more generous approach might prove worthwhile on the ground that Mussolini was alarmed at the prospect of Germany becoming a Mediterranean power.⁽⁴³⁾

4. *The Far East: Accommodation with Japan*

The story of attempts to come to an understanding with Japan, as one way of reducing the risk of hostilities when Britain was already at war with one or more major enemies, can be told more briefly. While, certainly from the point of view of the Admiralty, Japan was expected to prove a more formidable opponent than Italy, the possibilities for political bargaining with her were less. Apart from some economic and financial arrangements which were certainly not vital to Japan, almost the only counter Britain had in negotiations was either the naval building ratio introduced by the Washington Treaty of 1922, or open approval of further Japanese expansion at the expense of China. Neither of these could be bargained with—even had the British Government so desired—apart from a general agreement most unlikely to find support in the United States. Nonetheless, the situation *vis-à-vis* Japan was in one vital respect identical with that regarding Italy; what were regarded in London as the unavoidable limits of rearmament were taken to be the compelling reason for trying to get on better terms with Tokyo as we were trying to do with Rome.

The suggestion that an improvement of relations with Japan offered one means of lightening defence burdens in general was made as early as November 1933, during a C.I.D. discussion on the recent C.O.S. review of National and Imperial Defence.⁽⁴⁴⁾ And that was at a time when the German threat was still in its infancy and when the defence of our interests in the Far East remained 'the greatest and most immediate' of our naval commitments. The suggestion appears to have originated with the Treasury. The Foreign Secretary, on the other hand, while admitting the possible

danger from an ambitious Japan and the even more alarming prospect of a German-Japanese rapprochement against us, was anxious lest, in pursuing the object of better relations with Japan, we should forfeit the even more desirable friendship with the United States. Both in this debate, and in the detailed discussions on the first D.R.C. Report during the winter and spring of 1933-34, and at intervals before war broke out, it is possible to detect a difference of view between the Treasury and the Foreign Office in this matter. The difference was not always present, and it was rarely marked by the strong anti-Americanism shown by Sir Warren Fisher, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury. For the latter, the only way to get on better terms with Japan was to 'emancipate ourselves from thralldom' to the United States.⁽⁴⁵⁾* Chamberlain, as Chancellor, while sympathising with much that Fisher said, argued the case more moderately in suggesting, in May 1934, that current exchanges with Japan over the 'open door' policy in China might provide an opportunity for a wider discussion of matters of common interest to Japan and Britain.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In the end, the Cabinet decided to follow the 'dual policy' originally suggested in the D.R.C. report, i.e. 'an ultimate policy of accommodation with Japan, and an immediate and provisional policy of "showing a tooth" for the purpose of recovering the standing we have sacrificed in recent years'.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Economic talks and the suggestion of an Anglo-Japanese non-aggression pact led nowhere. A joint paper by the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in October, 1934, sought to analyse the problem of Anglo-Japanese relations and the reasons why no lasting solution had yet been found.⁽⁴⁸⁾ On major points the two Ministers were agreed. Our obligations under the Covenant and the Nine Power Treaty, as well as our own interests ruled out any arrangement which would give Japan a free hand in China. The only way to justify any new Anglo-Japanese arrangement to China would be to partner it by a specific promise from Japan to guarantee the territorial integrity of China herself. Any agreement, moreover, must serve the interests of the United States; and it was just possible that Japan might moderate her naval demands if she had a pact jointly with Britain and America. Finally, a pact would probably not harm Russo-Japanese relations, particularly with Russia's recent entry into the League. Despite his broad agreement with Simon, it is clear, however, that Chamberlain still had serious doubts about the United States. As he wrote to his sisters at this time—

'I have *no* doubt we could easily make an agreement with them [i.e. the Japanese] if the U.S.A. were out of the picture. It is the

* See above, p. 94.

Americans who are the difficulty and I don't know how we can get over it.'⁽⁴⁹⁾

Whatever the problem proposed by America, the fact was that the Japanese themselves made no more than vague hints of possible discussions. And as time went on it became clear that an improvement of relations would depend on the renewal of the naval treaty by the end of 1935; otherwise there could be no return to the happy circumstances of the old Anglo-Japanese alliance.

Despite this overshadowing of discussion by the prospect of the naval conference due to take place at the end of the year, there was more talk in 1935 of getting on better terms with Japan, with economic rather than strategic considerations playing the primary rôle. Early in the New Year the Cabinet were given the views of a recent Federation of British Industries mission to Japan and Manchukuo. The members of the mission showed themselves anxious about Japanese industrial and military strength and urged the Government to explore the possibility of an Anglo-Japanese agreement on a wide range of matters dealing with trade, in particular in China.⁽⁵⁰⁾ In the discussion that followed both the Treasury and the Board of Trade sympathised with this anxiety and argued that, failing positive measures to get on better terms, Japan and Britain would drift into more violent competition, not least over China.⁽⁵¹⁾ The Foreign Office, as before, warned of the danger of creating a breach between Britain and America and, again as before, urged that in the long-term Japan would be most successfully curbed by helping China to stand on her own feet.^{(52)*} In the end no constructive proposals emerged, nor did they from the Jubilee meetings of Dominion Prime Ministers in May. At those meetings there was support for friendlier relations with Japan, but no suggestions as to how they might be achieved.⁽⁵³⁾

At the end of 1935 two events served to pose the danger of a hostile Japan and the almost insurmountable difficulty of avoiding that hostility. The first was the final report of the D.R.C. which harked back to its earlier arguments and recommendations in this respect,[†] namely, that it was of cardinal importance to avoid simultaneous hostilities with Germany, Japan and another Power in between, and as important as ever to get back to a policy of 'accommodation and neighbourliness' with Japan, and that that, although difficult, would probably be easier than with Germany. And the only military safeguard against failure in this attempt was a Two-Power Standard navy. The second event was the refusal of Japan, at the London

* One outcome of this debate was the despatch of the Leith Ross mission to investigate and report upon economic conditions in China.

† See above, pp. 256-57.

Naval Conference, to accept anything less than equality of naval strength with Britain and America. Once that refusal led to Japan's withdrawal from the conference, Britain was left, for the rest of the pre-war period, in a position in which inability (or refusal) to build an adequate navy was bound to make political accommodation increasingly important as a method of avoiding an open break with Japan.

In late 1936 the situation seemed to grow even worse. In October there was a clash in Formosa between Japanese police and a British naval officer and ratings. A Japanese refusal of redress was then followed by the cancellation of a friendly visit of the Royal Navy to Japan.⁽⁵⁴⁾ On 25th November there followed the long forecast rapprochement between Germany and Japan with the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact.⁽⁵⁵⁾ It was in the light of these events that the Chiefs of Staff prepared their annual review, compiled primarily for the forthcoming Imperial Conference of May 1937.⁽⁵⁶⁾ This was a somewhat unusual paper, containing more political material than was usual and, as such, it came in for some criticism when presented to the C.I.D. in February 1937.⁽⁵⁷⁾ On political as well as military grounds, the Chiefs of Staff were, in general, pessimistic. So far as the Far East was concerned the threat to our interests rested on continued Sino-Japanese tension, on the Anti-Comintern Pact which might increase the risk of war in the Far East, and on the possibility that, in the face of increased Soviet strength, Japan might be diverted southwards where she would come more directly into conflict with our sphere of influence. Such a southward movement would not actually menace the security of the Dominions unless it gave Japan bases from which to threaten Singapore; and such bases might be found in the Netherlands East Indies, an area which the C.I.D. had now recognised as one of major British interest. But a move southwards would in any case threaten our trade and economic interests if, for example, Japan dominated the Philippines, Siam and Indo-China, and also if she penetrated further into central and southern China. Moreover, if all or any of this occurred within the next three years it would do so at a time when we would still be re-equipping and reorganising our defence forces.

Their doubts about the future led the Chiefs of Staff to urge, as they had done before, the desirability of some agreement with Japan on the ground, so the First Sea Lord explained, that it seemed 'possible that we might be compelled to give away less in negotiating agreements than we should sacrifice in the cost incurred in building up our defences'. The same argument applied also to other potential enemies. Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office and speaking now for the Foreign Secretary, was particularly severe in his criticisms of this paper, partly because he

considered the Chiefs of Staff had laid insufficient 'emphasis on the improbability of the conclusion of . . . an agreement with Japan'. On the whole, Vansittart was justified in his attack. And that not so much because the Chiefs of Staff had omitted to point out that such an agreement would be difficult to reach, as because insistence on the need to reach it—as with the normal Treasury argument on the same subject—was not accompanied by any concrete suggestions of how that was in practice to be done. The Foreign Office position was, normally, that agreement was desirable but most unlikely without some change in circumstances in the Far East, a change which must come about at any rate in part because of internal developments within that area. The Foreign Secretary himself saw some hope of a 'new era' in Sino-Japanese relations, with modifications of Japan's policy arising from failure to realise her full ambitions in Manchuria, greater cohesion in China, increasing Soviet power and our own rearmament.⁽⁵⁸⁾ But all, or any of this, if it came about, would lead to an improvement by modifying Japanese policy and not by an Anglo-Japanese alliance; the latter was ruled out because it would be bound to harm relations between Britain and America.

When the Imperial Conference met in May, 1937, one of the chief items dealt with was the proposal by the Australian Prime Minister for a Pacific non-aggression pact. Mr. Lyon's proposal was not put forward in detailed terms and leaves the impression that, however genuinely made, it had not been carefully thought out. To some extent it looked as though he was proposing a pact on the lines of the old Four Power Treaty between Britain, the United States, France and Japan, providing for the peaceful settlement of disputes in the Pacific and for concerted measures against threats of any outside power.* He also wanted economic and cultural collaboration, guarantees of non-aggression and reaffirmation of the principles of the Kellogg Briand Pact. Lyons also hoped that other countries, for example Russia, Holland and China, would join in arrangements of this kind.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Although there were differences of view about the proposal a technical committee was appointed to study and report on it.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The committee's report simply put the arguments for and against, pointing out that a pact must include China if it was to be worthwhile to her, that it might well be unacceptable to Japan on the ground that it would afford opportunity for interference in Sino-Japanese affairs, and that America might think it involved undesirable commitments on the mainland of East Asia.⁽⁶¹⁾ When the report was discussed by the full conference it was, on the whole, well received. Apart from South Africa, the Dominions were anxious to explore the possibilities further, although there was virtually no

* See above, Chapter I, Section 3.

discussion on how to deal with the admitted difficulties, not even when delegates were reminded that it would almost certainly be necessary to persuade China to recognise Manchukuo as part of the pact. In the end it was left to Britain to take soundings in the United States, China and Japan—and there the whole affair ended.⁽⁶²⁾

Shortly after the conference the Chiefs of Staff presented their Far East Appreciation to the D.P.(P), in which they set out the detailed application of the strategic principles of their earlier annual review as applied to the Far East.⁽⁶³⁾ Some of these details will be examined later.* All that matters to us here is that the Chiefs of Staff repeated the by now familiar argument that:

‘... the difficulties and dangers of conducting a war against Japan in the Far East, particularly if we were simultaneously engaged in Europe, are so great that it is manifest that no effort must be spared to establish such good relations with our former allies, the Japanese, as will obviate, as far as possible, the chances of their being aligned against us.’⁽⁶⁴⁾

During the weeks immediately following the presentation of the report it looked as though there really was a chance of lessening danger in the Far East—at least as far as Britain was concerned. A moderate Government, under Prime Minister Konoye, was in office in Tokyo, and Anglo-Japanese trade talks were expected to begin soon.⁽⁶⁵⁾ But this was the calm before the storm. On 7th July there was a clash between Chinese and Japanese troops near Peking which developed into general hostilities. In mid-August fighting spread to central China and, by the end of the year, Japan was in military control of China’s five northern provinces.†

For Britain the central problem throughout the winter of 1937-38 was to try to prevent the spread of hostilities, in other words to limit the range of Japanese aggression, but to do so only on a multi-lateral basis so that any provocation to Japan arising from such a policy should not result in Britain becoming involved in a one-to-one war against her.⁽⁶⁶⁾ It was 1931 all over again, but with apprehension heightened by memories of the earlier failure and of the rift between Britain and Japan which resulted from it. Moreover, within the British Government, and also within the Empire, there were differences of view about the advisability of trying to restrain Japan anyway. Finally, debate on the British side took place, as it was bound to do, with constant reference to naval strength and the warnings about a two or three front war which had so often, and so recently, been repeated by the Chiefs of Staff.

* See below, Chapter XI, Section 1.

† The original invasion of China proper began as far back as 1933 and was now being resumed.

China's appeal to the League of Nations produced little but a recommendation by the League's Far East Advisory Committee to protest to Japan in terms which carefully avoided the implication of aggression. What at first sight seemed a more promising move, from China's point of view, was a decision to hold a conference in Brussels of the signatories of the Nine Power Treaty designed to protect the integrity of China. The conference met on 3rd November. From the start, however, it was virtually doomed in its rôle as conciliator by the refusal of Japan to attend, on the ground that the 1922 Treaty had not been flouted since she had only acted in self-defence. On 24th November a resolution was passed putting the conference into temporary suspension so that the participating governments could exchange views and further explore peaceful methods for bringing the dispute to a conclusion. Moreover, there were no further League discussions on this subject in 1937.

The Cabinet in London discussed Far Eastern matters at several lengthy meetings before the Brussels Conference met. The first of these, on 6th October, was much concerned with President Roosevelt's 'quarantine speech' delivered in Chicago the previous day.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Ministers were not altogether clear about the President's meaning, although some thought he might have had economic sanctions in mind. Chamberlain certainly regarded it as very dangerous to appear to be picking a quarrel with Japan with the situation in Europe so serious. At two later meetings, most Ministers ruled out economic sanctions against Japan as unlikely to be in time to save China and, anyway, ineffective unless applied so strictly as to involve a clear risk of war. Mr. Eden thought that if the United States Government showed itself willing to accept the consequences of sanctions then the risk should be taken; others were more than doubtful whether any such assurance would be expected from a President known to be in the difficult position of having to educate his own public opinion. Conciliation and peace was the policy settled on for the Brussels conference.^{(68)*}

During these same weeks there was constant communication with the Dominions. Before Brussels the Australians and, even more, the New Zealanders favoured a tougher line towards Japan, and some restraint had to be exercised on the New Zealand representative at Geneva to avoid the development of an awkward situation.⁽⁷⁰⁾ By the time the conference assembled at Brussels, however, Australia

* In the House of Lords on 21st October a Government spokesman emphasised that the object of the Brussels conference was the restoration of peace. In the House of Commons, on 1st November, Eden emphasised that Britain would go as far as the U.S. and no further. At Brussels it became clear that the only sanction the United States was willing to apply against Japan was to refuse to buy Japanese goods—a sanction which the British Government regarded as unsatisfactory and as having been proved so already, earlier against Italy.⁽⁶⁹⁾

was already moving towards conciliation, although New Zealand continued to urge positive action against Japan. Canada, on the whole, aligned herself with Australia while South Africa, declaring her disbelief in the willingness of members of the League ever to make sacrifices for a common cause, argued also that any pressure on Japan from outside the League would smack too much of self-interest for her to join in.⁽⁷¹⁾ In the end, it is doubtful whether any of the Dominions or India, except New Zealand, really tried to push H.M. Government further than it wished to go.

When the Brussels Conference was over both the C.I.D. and the Cabinet took stock of the situation when discussing papers by the Chiefs of Staff and the Foreign Secretary in a comparison of the strength of Britain with that of certain other nations as at 1st January 1938.⁽⁷²⁾ The Chiefs of Staff once more repeated their warning on the need to reduce the number of our potential enemies. We could face an emergency either in the Far East or in the Mediterranean without anxiety. But the dominant feature of the present situation was the increasing probability that war would spread from one theatre to another. It was simply not possible to foresee a time when Britain, even allowing for help from France and perhaps other allies, would be strong enough to protect herself against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. Commenting on these views the Foreign Secretary said, in his own paper, that he found much in them he agreed with. But he still thought that there would be great difficulty about putting the argument for political accommodation into practice. He himself disliked the idea of attempting to detach any one member of the Anti-Comintern bloc by offers of support for, or acquiescence in, their policies and actions. There was no reason why contacts should not be maintained with them all or why we should not attempt to establish better relations; but the aims of all three were, in varying degrees, inimical to British interests, and surrender to one or other of them might well lead to concerted action of all three to secure yet further concessions. A safer and more honourable policy would be to tolerate the present state of armed truce and to trust to our own strength and that of our allies, as well as to potential differences between our enemies, to maintain some sort of equilibrium and make possible an eventual settlement of disputes without war. This would be, so Mr. Eden said, 'the unheroic policy of so-called "cunctation"'.⁽⁷³⁾

The C.I.D. discussion of those papers revealed some not unfamiliar differences of view. The Chancellor of the Exchequer choosing to regard 'cunctation' not as delaying action but as 'marking time and doing nothing' complained that in practice, far from doing nothing, 'we were in the process of spending fifteen hundred million pounds. He did not for one moment mean to imply that this expenditure

ought to be curtailed; but it was clear that we could not go on at this rate for ever, and that a political adjustment with one or more of our potential enemies was absolutely vital'.⁽⁷⁴⁾ At the opposite end of the spectrum the First Lord, Mr. Duff Cooper, argued that, in view of the difficulties outlined in the Foreign Office paper, the time had now come to reconsider the basis of our defence preparations and to plan on the need to deal with three enemies simultaneously.

Mr. Eden, for his part, tried to explain the reasons for his views further. He thought that the Chiefs of Staff had perhaps overestimated the staying power of our potential enemies, and that Italy and Japan might be weaker as time went on. But his main contention was 'that the basis of our present foreign policy could not be modified'. He could see no way of remedying our present situation *vis-à-vis* Japan and, so far as Italy was concerned there remained 'the fundamental difficulty . . . that no reliance whatsoever could be placed on her promises'. In so fluid a situation who could tell what the international alignment would be in a year's time? And why risk losing friends when it was so patently unlikely that we could win over our enemies?

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister, who had already observed that it would be 'an impossible problem' to deal with three major enemies simultaneously, produced a mixed bag of opinions which make it difficult to know exactly where he stood. He warned his colleagues that it would be a mistake 'to count too much on assistance from either France or the United States of America in the event of war'. The first was not strong enough; the second, if she intervened, would probably be too late. Nonetheless, and like Mr. Eden, he saw no prospect of success in foreign policies which might shame us in the eyes of the world, and preferred the kind of policy currently being pursued by the Foreign Office. Every effort was being made to keep open the lines to Tokyo and Rome. What was not clear was whether the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary agreed in their views about the details of the policy 'at present being pursued by the Foreign Office.' Less than three months later they disagreed sufficiently for the Foreign Secretary to resign.

Despite some easing of tension in the Far East during the early months of 1938 the atmosphere of crisis was intensified with the extension of fighting southwards in China in May. But this happened when the threat of war in Europe appeared to be becoming worse and the result was a further attempt to avoid antagonising Japan. This became clear in a Cabinet debate in mid-July on the subject of financial aid to China.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The Foreign Office view was, that, apart from obligations under League resolutions to help China, the protection of our own interests and prestige in the Far East outweighed the risks of Japanese resentment and perhaps hostility arising from a

loan. Besides, faced with problems in China and the possibility of hostile action from Russia, Japan was unlikely to push resentment to the point of war. Finally, China's resistance was all that stood in the way of Japan's successful accomplishment of designs which would almost certainly entail the entire loss of British interests and trade in China. The opposing Treasury view was not primarily a financial one. It was based on anxiety about the political effect of a loan to China on Japan. Most Ministers were strongly influenced by the fear that, since a loan could not be so tied up as to prevent the Chinese Government from using it for war purposes, then Japan would regard this as aid to her enemy; this would greatly increase the likelihood of hostilities simultaneously in Europe and the Far East. Nor was it likely that a loan would be sufficient to save China from defeat. By the end of a second day's discussion the Ministers were aware that the United States was unwilling to share in the loan. And when Lord Halifax, now Foreign Secretary, himself came down against his own Department's recommendations the Foreign Office case was clearly defeated.

Both before and after Munich the overwhelming importance of events in Europe pushed consideration of Far Eastern affairs into the background. The war between China and Japan continued and there were, at intervals, crises of varying significance for this country. But throughout the winter of 1938-39, and even more so in the spring of 1939, when detailed talks about war plans were held with the French, the assumption grew that Japan had too much on her hands already to invite a quarrel with Britain unless the latter was already at war in Europe. This, in turn, began to change long established plans for the distribution of the ships of the Royal Navy in a war conducted in Europe and the Far East simultaneously.* Then, in June 1939, there occurred the last serious pre-war crisis in the Far East as far as Britain was concerned. Four alleged Chinese terrorists took refuge in the British Concession at Tientsin. The Japanese demanded that they be handed over to them and imposed a blockade. For a time it seemed that, contrary to recent expectations, war might in fact break out in the Far East independently of Europe and, in consequence, the Admiralty were asked for their views about reverting to the traditional strategy of sending a major battle fleet to Singapore.† The resulting appreciation led, in turn, to the last full length C.I.D. discussion of British policy and strategy in the Far East before war broke out in September.⁽⁷⁶⁾ At the C.I.D. meeting on 26th June it became clear that Britain was in no position to engage in war against Japan and must pin her hopes of a settlement on negotiation. Even the maximum

* See below, Chapter XI, Section 2.

† See below, Chapter XI, Section 2.

force we could send to the Far East on the outbreak of war, in the Prime Minister's words, 'could do nothing to stop the Japanese Fleet freezing our people and trade out of China' and it would not be possible to 'go north to relieve Hong Kong if the Japanese attacked it'. Lord Halifax said that the advice to him was that the Japanese would not be impressed, in any case, by our sending a fleet to Singapore and that such a move would avail us nothing 'while involving us in considerable risk elsewhere'. In fact, no retaliatory action against the Japanese seemed feasible. Some members of the Committee argued that Britain's prestige, both at home and in the Far East, was bound to suffer if humiliation was accepted without retaliation. But nobody suggested an acceptable alternative to negotiation. And that remained true until the outbreak of war in September. Moreover, as the Prime Minister had observed early on in the meeting, and without contradiction, this situation was basically due to the fact that Britain had 'widely separated interests in three parts of the world; and, as we could not be as strong as we would like to be in all these theatres simultaneously, the question was one of priorities'.

It is possible, in tracing the story of reactions to the threat of the 'gathering storm,' to detect some occasional differences of view between the British Government's military and foreign political advisers. One such difference became clear during discussions about the advisability of strengthening our ties with France, a country assumed by all concerned to be a necessary ally of Britain in a major war.* Mr. Eden and others at the Foreign Office wanted Staff talks with the French and wanted them to take place on the assumption of a serious British commitment; and some of those in the Foreign Office who took this view also regarded the Chiefs of Staff, and not without reason, 'as terrified of any co-operation with the French'.⁽⁷⁷⁾† There were other differences of opinion on the likelihood of having to face three enemies at once. Mr. Eden's view was that this danger could be over-estimated. The three possible enemies were not all as threatening as the Chiefs of Staff sometimes supposed, and it was by no means certain that they would all go to war against us simultaneously, and they were even less likely to do so if Britain made determined and well publicised efforts to improve her own armaments and to strengthen her connections with her friends. The Chiefs of Staff, on the other hand were set, first, on trying to remove one or more of those three Powers from the list of possible enemies; rearmament would then be designed to cope with the resulting situation.

* See below, Chapter XVI.

† The Chiefs of Staff, while arguing to some extent differently at different times, were afraid that the French might act irresponsibly if assured in detail of British backing. The Foreign Office, on the other hand, did not share this view, or considered that the risk was worth taking.

And what appeared to be no more than a difference of emphasis was, in fact, sometimes one of substantive policy.

Foreign Office irritation with the Chiefs of Staff, when it arose from differences of this sort, is not difficult to understand. But sometimes it was less than fair. It was natural and, indeed, proper for the military to anticipate the worst. It was equally proper for the Chiefs of Staff to emphasise that, according to any rational calculation, it would be impossible for Britain to cope with operations against Germany, Italy and Japan at the same time. What could be criticised in the approach of the Chiefs of Staff to these problems was their persistent refusal to accept some of the obvious consequences of the hard facts they presented to Ministers. Nonetheless, it so happened that the Cabinet as a whole had more sympathy with the views of the Chiefs of Staff than with those of the Foreign Office. There were those who advised Mr. Eden that he was 'the only Foreign Secretary in sight', and that his resignation would drag the Government down with him.^{(78)*} They were completely wrong. In Lord Halifax Mr. Chamberlain found a new Foreign Secretary with views closely akin to his own and with whom his differences of opinion were genuinely ones of emphasis and not of principle. As a result, and in the short-term, the Prime Minister's position was stronger than ever after Mr. Eden's resignation, and the coincidence of views between Ministers and Chiefs of Staff even closer than before. Political negotiation, appeasement, was assumed to be an essential accompaniment to rearmament on an acceptable scale, and there was no substantial, certainly no active opposition within the Cabinet to that policy.

In the long-term, however, Mr. Eden's judgment was surely correct. Mussolini, with his dreams of empire, was bound to be jealous of Britain's influence in the Mediterranean, and could be successfully negotiated with only from a position of strength. Such a position demanded military preparations before talks, and a common policy with France. Moreover, since Mussolini was most unlikely to open hostilities on his own—and the Chiefs of Staff as well as Mr. Eden took that view—then strength was necessary primarily to deny Germany an opportunity for military success which might, in its turn, tempt Mussolini to jump on the the Axis bandwagon. The problem of Japan was more complicated. Nonetheless, Mr. Eden was also surely right to argue that she would not necessarily go to war because her Anti-Comintern partners decided to do so. Unlike them she had to think of her relations with the United States. And here again, Mr. Eden's views about what was implied in that situation for Britain were more far-sighted than those of Mr. Chamberlain.

* This is not intended to imply that Mr. Eden agreed with those who so advised him.

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- (31) C.O.S. 215th Mtg. and 216th Mtg.; see also C.I.D. 1347-B and 1350-B 389
- (32) See The Earl of Avon, *op. cit.*, Chapter XII; Harvey, *op. cit.*, Pt. II; Thompson, *op. cit.*, Chapter 8; see also Neville Chamberlain's diary, a long entry dated 19th February 1938 . . . 389
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- (47) D.R.C. 14, p. 33; C.P. 205(34), paras. 6-11 394
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- (49) Letter dated 27th October 1934. See also Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946), pp. 253-54 395
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- (52) C.P. 8(35) 395
- (53) P.M.(35) 2nd, 3rd and 4th Mtgs. 395
- (54) Cab. Cons. 60(36) 396
- (55) For a warning earlier in 1936 that something like this would happen, see C.P. 12(36) 396
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| (68) Cab. Cons. 37(37) and 38(37) | 399 |
| (69) H.L. 5s, Vol. 106: 1077; H.C. 5s, Vol. 328: 583, 595. The Earl of Avon, <i>op. cit.</i> , Pt. II, Chapter IX and Harvey <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 56 | 399 |
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PART III
CHAPTER XI
NAVAL STRATEGY: PLANS,
1936-39

1. *Strategic Priorities 1936-38*

LET US NOW TURN to a consideration of the naval plans drawn up during the period of the political negotiations described in the previous chapter.

In February 1937 the Chiefs of Staff prepared a comprehensive review of national and imperial defence for the Imperial Conference to be held later that year.⁽¹⁾ Since the similar review of 1935,^{(2)*} the international situation had deteriorated with Germany's increasing rearmament and her military reoccupation of the hitherto demilitarised Rhineland zone. Italy had now clearly become a potential, if not an established enemy; certainly, it was no longer possible to count automatically on her friendship. And while it was the situation in Europe which had deteriorated beyond the worst fears of two years before, nothing had happened basically to improve the situation in the Far East. Indeed, the agreement reached between Germany and Japan in 1936 might well prove to have increased the risk that Britain would be involved in war simultaneously in the Far East and in Europe; and, in Europe, against Germany and Italy combined.

Estimating the dangers to the Commonwealth implicit in this situation, the Chiefs of Staff placed first the danger to the United Kingdom itself. 'Her defeat would destroy the whole structure of the Commonwealth, which in its present state of development could not long exist without the political, financial and military strength of the United Kingdom.' Since a German victory over France or, to a lesser extent, the permanent occupation of the Low Countries, would lead to a situation from which a most serious threat to the United Kingdom could develop, it was 'an essential interest of the United Kingdom to do everything in its power to support France and the Low Countries against German aggression'. Elsewhere, the security of Australia, New Zealand and India depended upon the retention

* See above, pp. 376-77.

of Singapore as a base for the British Fleet. The Mediterranean, particularly the eastern Mediterranean, was a focal point of communications both by sea and by air; indeed without our continued influence there on the basis of sea power we would lack the power to exploit developing air routes independently of other nations.

The Chiefs of Staff then listed the military liabilities for which the British Commonwealth should 'at the present time be prepared, in the following terms and order of priority:

'Security of our Imperial Communications throughout the world.

Security of the United Kingdom against German aggression.

Security of Empire interests in the Far East against Japanese aggression.

Security of interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East.

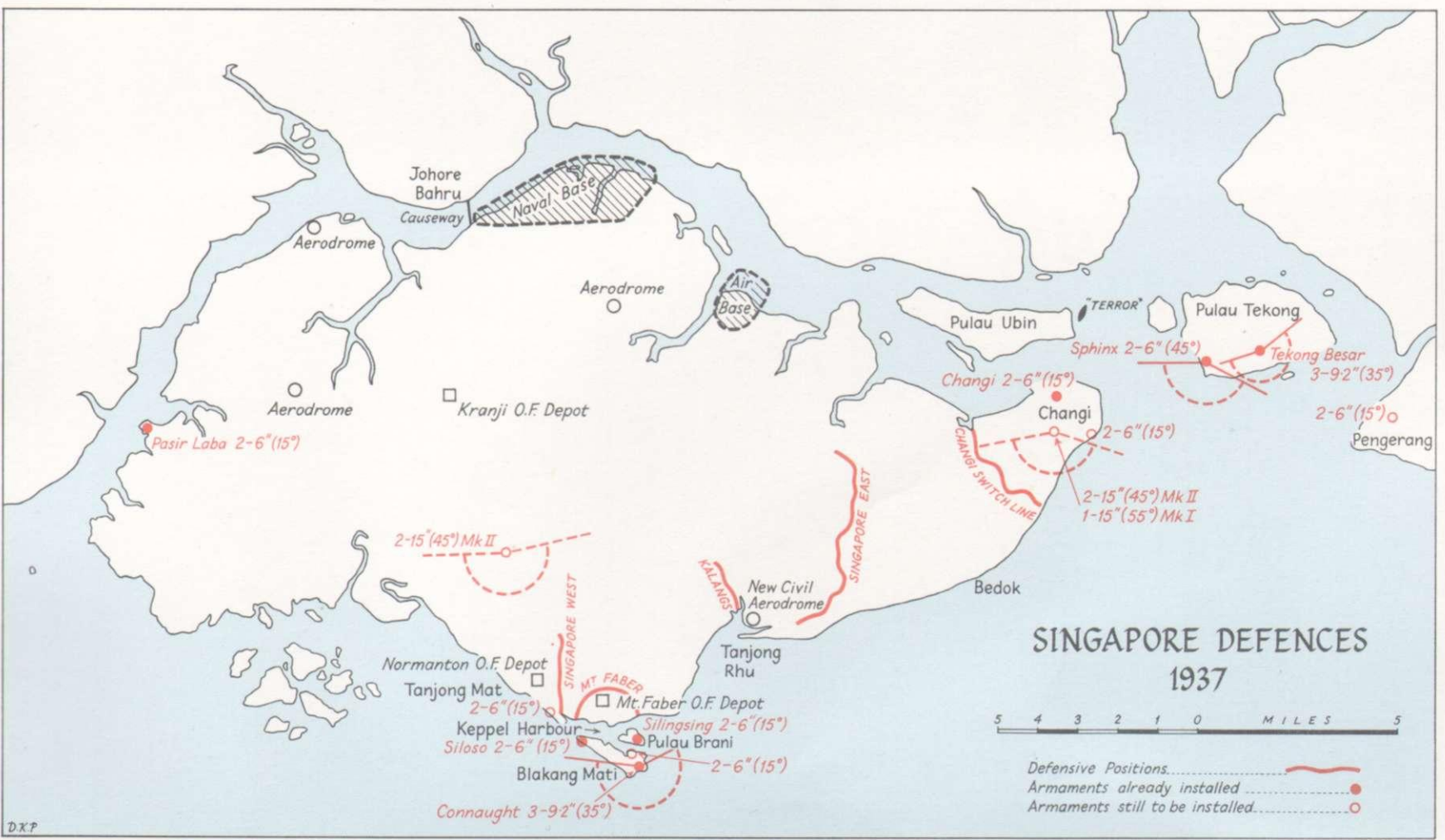
Security of India against Soviet aggression.'

This order of priorities was clearly reflected in plans for the strategic deployment of the Royal Navy. The Chiefs of Staff were quite explicit that, in a war against Germany and Japan at the same time, 'the strength of the Fleet that could be sent to the Far East must be governed by consideration of our home requirements'. They went on:

'In our Annual Review for 1935 we stated that: Although His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom would never, we presume, confide the entire protection of this country and its vital sea communications to a foreign navy in the absence of our Main Fleet, yet if France were our ally, her naval forces could undertake part of this responsibility. A British capital ship, cruiser and destroyer strength in home waters equal to that of Germany is probably the least we could accept. We re-affirm the above view.'⁽³⁾

So far as fighting against Japan was concerned, the strategic position would depend upon the presence of a British Fleet in Far Eastern waters. Taking into consideration the repair and modernisation programmes until the middle of 1939, and given the prior demands of a war against Germany, then it would be possible to send to the Far East a fleet only approximately equal to that of Japan.

'Turning to the possible strategy that Japan might adopt', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'she will realise that the presence of the British Fleet in the Far East will be a dominating factor in the



strategical situation, and that Singapore is vital to the maintenance of that fleet. Japan might, therefore, embark at once upon major operations for the capture of Singapore, or with the object of establishing shore-based air forces within striking range. She might attempt, at the same time, to delay our fleet by sabotage in the Suez Canal. In any such operations, however, Japan will always be faced with the certainty of having to fight a fleet action with us on the arrival of our fleet off Singapore. The defeat of the Japanese Fleet would imperil their home country. To fight our fleet off Singapore, at a great distance from her own repair bases, Japan would require a considerable superiority. This superiority she does not possess. Hence it appears unlikely that Japan would embark on major operations against Singapore, although in view of the decisive results at stake the possibility of such action can never be definitely excluded. Japan might, however, carry out raids against Singapore with the object of damaging the base facilities.

Japan, however, could make herself secure in her own waters, and could improve her position and strike a blow at our prestige by operations designed to capture or neutralise Hong Kong. Japanese success in these operations would be much more probable than in those against Singapore. In addition to operations against Hong Kong, we would expect Japan to occupy all potential fleet bases in China, north and east of Hong Kong, and to make full use of commerce raiders to attack our trade in the South China Seas, Pacific and Indian Oceans, to cause anxiety and dislocation on certain of our trade routes and force dispersion upon our forces. To this end Japan might endeavour to operate naval forces from temporary bases in Borneo and the Netherlands East Indies, where a number of suitable positions is available. Japan might also endeavour to delay the arrival of our fleet, to reduce its heavy ship strength by a process of attrition, e.g. by submarine and minelaying activities, and to produce conditions favourable to herself for a fleet action.

After the arrival of the fleet at Singapore, we should be in a position to maintain the situation in the Far East as it existed, and prevent any further aggression. If Hong Kong had fallen, any operations for its recapture would probably be impossible. On the other hand, if Hong Kong was still holding out, we ought to be able to reinforce our garrison there. In general, therefore, the fleet should be able to give covering protection to trade in the East, to prevent Japan undertaking any major operation against India, Australia, New Zealand or Borneo. Once the fleet is established at Singapore, the risk of Japanese attack on India, Australia or New Zealand would, in effect, be reduced to that of raids only; and even this risk should be slight and, in the case of India, probably negligible. Subsequent naval action would depend upon the result of testing the efficiency of the Japanese navy.

It must be noted that, should we require to reinforce the Air Forces in the Far East to counter any Japanese operations designed to establish powerful shore-based air forces in any particular area, our only adequate source of reinforcements would be our Metropolitan Air Force. Any serious reduction of this force would leave the United Kingdom dangerously inferior in the air to Germany.

On the economic side Japan could ensure the security of her vital short sea routes. With the fleet at Singapore we should cut Japan's trade routes with Europe and Southern Asia. As regards the trans-Pacific route, our naval forces, if working from Canadian ports, which had been made suitable for the purpose, and the West Indies, could interfere with imports for Japan by action against Japanese shipping and by the exercise of contraband control, activities with which Japan should not be able seriously to interfere on account of the great distances involved. Action by the United States of America as regards placing an embargo on the supply of war materials to belligerents would virtually close this source of supply to Japan. It may be noted that recent economic developments in Japan have rendered her much less self-sufficient than used to be the case.

As regards Empire trade, we must be prepared for the loss of the China trade, and for initial losses in the Pacific and Indian oceans. A full examination of the situation leads us to believe that, after the arrival of the British Fleet at Singapore, the economic position of the British Empire should not be seriously threatened by any scale of attack that can reasonably be expected.

The position, therefore would appear to be that Japan might have to rely almost entirely on her short sea routes, a situation which might produce most serious economic results for her after a period of some two years or more, during which time the British Empire would not be subjected to any comparable economic dislocation. In the economic sphere, therefore, we enjoy very definite advantages over Japan, advantages that in the long run should prove decisive.'

So far as the Mediterranean was concerned the Chiefs of Staff views were those which they had voiced before and were to repeat on several occasions before September 1939. They pointed out that the security of Britain's interests there had in the past depended to a large extent on a friendly Italy and a weak Spain. Until it was clear beyond any doubt that these two assets had vanished, and while Britain was already rearming on a very substantial scale to meet other liabilities, they considered it unwise to attempt, in addition, the far reaching developments which would be necessary to establish Britain's security in the Mediterranean on a purely military basis.

'Indeed', they wrote, 'it is only while we avoid war against Italy that the security of our sea communications through the Mediterranean, which is one of our chief interests in that area, can be maintained.

If we are at war with Italy, any British convoy passing through the Mediterranean could be attacked by the main Italian Fleet, and would therefore need the escort of equally powerful naval forces, and its passage would thus become a major fleet operation.

Consequently, immediately war broke out against Italy, as much British shipping as possible would have to be diverted to the Cape route.

In addition to the threat from Italian naval forces, British shipping in the neighbourhood of the Malta Channel would be exposed to heavy attacks from Italian shore-based aircraft and, pending war experience, we cannot rely during the first few weeks of war on shipping army and air reinforcements through the western Mediterranean to Egypt, except such limited forces and equipment as could be conveyed in His Majesty's ships.

Thus, our sea communications through the Mediterranean can only be made really secure, either by maintaining friendship with Italy, or by establishing ourselves in such military strength in the Mediterranean as would permanently deter Italy from embarking on war against us.

The danger that Italy will attack our interests would only be likely to arise if we were engaged in a war with another Power and Italy considered that her intervention might lead to our defeat. From this it follows that our military establishments in the Mediterranean would need to be independent of those necessary for our other liabilities in order that they might constitute an effective deterrent against Italy. In these circumstances our needs would be immense. They would include major increases in our naval strength and the construction of an additional naval base in the eastern Mediterranean. Our army and air force garrisons in the Mediterranean and Middle East would have to be materially increased, the defences of our existing bases would have to be strengthened and overland communications from the South and East to the eastern Mediterranean would have to be developed.

If it should become our policy to adopt these measures their development would take several years. Our immediate problem is how, with our existing resources, we could best defend our Mediterranean possessions and other interests in the event of aggression by Italy.

In a single-handed war the British Fleet is the chief means by which, through interference with trade, we might hope to bring effective pressure upon Italy. Our Army and Air Force in Egypt could, even independently of the Navy, prevent direct communication between Italy and her East African colonies and thus add to our pressure on Italy.

Although in a single-handed war, our naval superiority over Italy would be very great, our operations would be handicapped by our lack of bases. We cannot, pending war experience of A/A defences, rely on the full facilities of Malta being available for the fleet in war, and we should have to supplement our western and central bases at Gibraltar and Malta by improvising an eastern base. Lack of dock accommodation is a serious difficulty.

A major difficulty in organising our defence measures would lie in the extreme risks to which reinforcements for our army and air garrisons would be exposed if they were moved through the Mediterranean once war had broken out. Even their movement via the Red Sea would be uncertain, since Italian air forces in Eritrea and Abyssinia might subject British shipping in the Red Sea to intense attacks. Reinforcements might initially be limited to units and equipment which could be conveyed in His Majesty's ships or moved by air or overland via either East Africa or Iraq.

There is a grave possibility of the recurrence of trouble in Palestine, but apart from this, the situation in the Middle East generally is now greatly improved and when friendly relations with Italy have been permanently restored, will again be satisfactory.'⁽⁴⁾

It will be seen that the view of the Chiefs of Staff still continued, like that of Ministers, to be that Italy's enmity should not yet be taken for granted and might, in fact, be replaced with something like the old friendly relations. And again, as with Ministers, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in face of the 'immense' needs of full preparations in the Mediterranean and the 'several years' it would take to make these preparations effective, the Chiefs of Staff were, in fact, arguing that the Mediterranean was not yet to be catered for partly because they hoped that it might never prove necessary to do so, and partly because to do so was, at present, not a practical proposition. Policy had been based on that view for the past year.*

This optimistic treatment of what was to prove, eventually, a desperate and critical problem, demonstrated that the Mediterranean theatre, at this stage, came quite clearly last in the order of priority. Not only had the Chiefs of Staff set out this as a general condition of overall strategic planning, they also made it clear beyond any doubt specifically in terms of naval strategy.

'At the present time', they wrote, 'if war should break out and spread it seems possible that we, with France and her Allies, might be involved against Germany, Italy and Japan. The issues with which we should be faced even among the major

* See above, p. 386.

Powers would be dependent on numerous uncertain factors. Any attempt to forecast the action of the minor powers, which might be drawn into the conflict, would be conjectural, but we are informed by the Foreign Office that Poland, Yugoslavia and Turkey are unlikely to join in hostilities against us or even follow a policy hostile to us, provided we are strong.

A few broad statements only can usefully be made as to the situation of the British Empire in such a world war.

The security of the United Kingdom and the security of Singapore would be the keystones on which the survival of the British Commonwealth of Nations would depend. We should anticipate a direct air offensive against the former at the outset. Attack upon the latter might be delayed, but would not necessarily be prevented by Japan's engagement with the U.S.S.R., since there is, at present, no Soviet surface fleet in the Far East, and, consequently, there would be little restriction on Japanese naval operations. A British fleet would have to proceed to the Far East leaving sufficient strength in home waters to neutralise the German fleet.

We could rely on France to neutralise the Italian fleet in the Mediterranean to some extent, to maintain command of the western Mediterranean, and, with the assistance of the U.S.S.R., to prevent essential trade reaching Italy. At the same time, so long as we retained our position in Egypt, we could control the Suez Canal. Some or all of our Mediterranean possessions might be in a state of siege, and we might be hard put to it to maintain our forces in Egypt; but this weakness in the Mediterranean would not be nearly so serious as the surrender of our sea-power in the Far East. That would enable the Japanese to undertake deliberate operations against Singapore, which in default of any possibility of relief, might fall, leaving the coasts of India, Australia and New Zealand and the sea routes to these Dominions open to Japanese attack.

This situation demands recognition of the principle that no anxieties or risks connected with our interests in the Mediterranean can be allowed to interfere with the despatch of a fleet to the Far East.'⁽⁵⁾

A little later, in June 1937, the Chiefs of Staff prepared a detailed Appreciation of the Situation in the Far East. The main part of the appreciation was based on the assumption of a one-to-one war against Japan. The paper did, however, contain sections which set out to estimate how a war against Japan would be affected in the following circumstances:

- (a) Germany not actively but potentially hostile;
- (b) Germany actively hostile;
- (c) Germany actively hostile, with Italy intervening on the

side of Britain's enemies, and the U.S.S.R. joining in on Britain's side.*⁽⁶⁾

As the Chiefs of Staff pointed out, the analysis of a possible one-to-one war against Japan was largely an academic exercise, since it was assumed that 'this country is never likely to be faced by a situation in which our plans for a war in the Far East can be framed without reference to consequent risks in other areas'.⁽⁷⁾ In other words the problem of war against Japan could never be regarded as independent of the political situation in Europe, particularly since the 1936 agreement between Germany and Japan. Nonetheless, the one-to-one war could be used to provide some simple guide lines to the more complicated circumstances of war, with or without allies, against several enemies simultaneously.

In analysing this one-to-one situation the Chiefs of Staff came to certain general strategic conclusions which had been implicit in considerations of this kind since the Washington Treaty. First, that it would be very largely a naval war in which the operations of the two battle-fleets would ultimately decide the issue. In other words, while such a war would make full demands on Britain's naval resources, it would not require the employment of either her army or her air force on a national scale.⁽⁸⁾ Second, it followed that it would be vital for Britain to get her Main Fleet out to the Far East as soon as possible after the outbreak of hostilities and essential for the operations of the Main Fleet that the facilities of the Singapore base be freely available as long as the war lasted. There should be an allowance of 70 days for the passage of the fleet from home waters to Singapore.⁽⁹⁾ Third, it was considered unlikely that Japan would adopt an offensive strategy.

It is not necessary to point out here in detail the extremely optimistic nature of this analysis, except to underline the curious assumption that the Japanese would not detect and exploit the basic weakness of the by now accepted British strategy, viz., the time lag of between two and three months before the fleet reached Singapore. Nor is this entirely a matter of hindsight. For over a generation it had been recognised that, for certain purposes, European and Far Eastern theatres must be regarded as separate; forces could not be interchanged between them as, for long past, they could be interchanged between different areas in home and Mediterranean waters. In practice, if not in theory, this long established experience was ignored by the assumption that our Far East strategy in a one-to-one war against Japan could virtually begin from the time when the fleet reached Singapore.

* See above, p. 398.

However, as the Chiefs of Staff recognised, the one-to-one situation was most unlikely. What would be the position *vis-à-vis* Japan were Britain already engaged in war against Germany and perhaps Italy also? In analysing these situations the Chiefs of Staff spelled out in detail some strategic views already made clear and some others which pointed to the uncertainties of the future. So far as Italy was concerned, the issue at this stage was dealt with on already accepted lines. There was no hesitation in repeating the proposition that 'no anxieties or risks connected with our interests in the Mediterranean can be allowed to interfere with the despatch of a fleet to the Far East'.⁽¹⁰⁾ The circumstances of a simultaneous war against Germany, however, were more important and here an element of doubt appeared to creep in. Obviously the range of options at any particular moment would depend to some extent, upon the number of units available—particularly capital ships; the units available—and apart from previous battle casualties—would in turn depend upon the time when war broke out and upon building programmes. Nevertheless, there would always be a considerable element of doubt in forecasting the degree of defensiveness which would be imposed upon a Far Eastern strategy by the need to deal first with the more serious menace from Germany in home waters. In any case, in such circumstances it would be impossible to base our plans on any other assumption than that of the impossibility of operations forward of Singapore.⁽¹¹⁾ But that was not the worst danger.

'To take a probable situation in the European theatre, our naval forces may be operating at strength in the Atlantic, considerably dispersed . . . while a proportion of our heavy ships may be assisting with French African convoys. If, in these circumstances, we have to deal with Japan, a very considerable period may elapse before the progress of our operations against Germany and the redistribution of our forces permit of a fleet arriving in the Far East.

Apart from the naval aspect, the delay which political considerations may impose on the despatch of a fleet to the Far East cannot be assessed, however definitely the principle that a fleet should in these circumstances proceed without delay to Singapore may now be affirmed.'⁽¹²⁾

There were some consequential conclusions. Reserves held at Singapore and Hong Kong should be stepped up from 60 days supply at best to a minimum of 70 days for Singapore and 90 for Hong Kong. And the period of 70 days at present allowed before the arrival of the fleet at Singapore could no longer be regarded as a maximum. Most important of all, even if these more conservative calculations were made 'the danger that the fortresses might fall

through investment will not be eliminated'.⁽¹³⁾ Here was the first sign of fundamental doubt about the possibility of a major Far East strategy which became explicit in the summer of 1939.*

The substance of these views was communicated to the Dominions at the Imperial Conference of May-June 1937. At the first plenary meeting of the Conference defence was among the topics passed to a series of meetings of principal delegates for study in the first instance. But, in fact, those delegates confined themselves mainly to discussions of defence in general terms and, as far as the Far East was concerned, the detailed work was largely done at meetings between the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, the Chiefs of Staff, the Prime Ministers and other representatives of Australia, New Zealand and India.⁽¹⁴⁾

After two preliminary meetings the Chiefs of Staff saw Dominion representatives twice on 1st and 7th June. A modified version of the Far East Appreciation had been circulated and formed the basis of discussion. Outlining the Appreciation at the first of the two meetings the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield, mentioned briefly that in the event of war with Germany 'some considerable time might elapse before the Fleet could start for the Far East', but emphasised that the establishment of the Fleet at Singapore at the earliest moment possible after the outbreak of war still remained the basis of Britain's Far East strategy. He then dealt with some of the questions submitted by the Australian and New Zealand delegations not already covered by the Appreciation. One of these was a New Zealand request to know why it was not possible to maintain in peace-time a fleet in the Far East sufficient to contain that of Japan. The answer was, first, a political one. The most likely time for a war with Japan was when Britain was already involved in one in Europe, and a strong factor for the preservation of peace there would be the presence of a strong British fleet in home waters; further, Britain would have to have in the Far East a fleet equal to that of the Japanese Navy, and to send such a force in peace-time would be most challenging diplomatically. Second, it would be administratively difficult; Singapore would have to be greatly expanded to the size of, say, Portsmouth and Devonport combined, which would involve huge expense. Finally, the general public in Britain might not look at all favourably on the permanent retention of the major part of the Navy such a long way from home, and there would certainly be an outcry if the majority of capital ships were in the Far East when a European war broke out. Both Dominions were also anxious about the long period before the relief of Singapore. Both were given somewhat evasive answers pending the result of

* See below, Section 2.

current investigation of the subject; but under pressure from the Australians, the Chiefs of Staff claimed that the security of Singapore could almost certainly be guaranteed and could be regarded as a first class insurance for the security of Australia. The Australian Defence Minister then expressed himself satisfied.⁽¹⁵⁾

Some months later, in February 1938, the Chiefs of Staff analysed many of these same problems in a detailed Appreciation of the situation in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North-East Africa. As in the case of the earlier paper on the Far East, the situation was first reviewed on the hypothesis of a single-handed war, this time against Italy. Then, in subsequent sections, the situation was examined on the assumption that first Germany and then Japan was aligned by Italy's side. Only the last situation will be discussed here; this was the worst contingency and compelled the Chiefs of Staff to establish a clear order of priority for a situation in which it would be impossible to protect British interests everywhere.

A war against Germany, Japan and Italy simultaneously in 1938, was, the Chiefs of Staff were quite clear, 'a commitment which neither the present nor the projected strength of our defence forces is designed to meet, even if we were in alliance with France and Russia, and which would, therefore, place a dangerous strain on the resources of the Empire'. Although such a war would undoubtedly mean 'very great danger' to Britain's interests in the Mediterranean, yet those interests had to be considered in relation to responsibilities at home and in the Far East. In such conditions the Chiefs of Staff saw no reason to alter their view, already twice expressed in 1937, that the United Kingdom and Singapore must be defended first, and that no danger in the Mediterranean could be allowed to interfere with the despatch of a fleet to the Far East.⁽¹⁶⁾

The implications of this decision for the conduct of war against Italy were then also made clear.

'The chief result of Japanese participation would be that our naval forces in the Mediterranean would be reduced to a few submarines and light surface forces. This would mean that Italy would be able to control the sea communications in the eastern Mediterranean, subject always to any action which the French Navy might be able to take.

When our naval forces are finally disposed to meet the Japanese threat in the East and the German threat in the west, it will be difficult to spare many ships for the Aden and Red Sea area.

The route to be taken by the Fleet on passage to the Far East would depend on the situation in the Mediterranean when Japan intervened. If the war with Italy had then been in progress for sufficient time to enable us to get the upper hand in

the central Mediterranean, the route via the Suez Canal would be used. If, however, the position in the central area was not yet under control, units for the Far East, other than those already in the eastern Mediterranean, would probably proceed via the Cape, the decision as to the route being taken at the time in the light of the situation then existing.

* * * * *

We should hope to maintain at Aden adequate naval forces to control the entrance to the Red Sea and deny freedom of movement to Italian forces or expeditions therein; but in view of our many naval commitments we cannot rely on the provision of sufficient escorts to ensure the regular use of the Red Sea as a supply route to Egypt.⁽¹⁷⁾

2. *Strategic Priorities: Munich to the Outbreak of War*

As we have now seen, in the eighteen months before Munich both Ministers and Chiefs of Staff on several occasions reaffirmed the by now accepted principles of naval strategy in a war fought in several theatres. Protection of the United Kingdom and of her sea communications must come first, protection of imperial interests in the Far East second, and the Mediterranean theatre third. Equally, however clear the principles, the application of them was bound to involve some uncertainty. The demands made on the Navy by a war against Germany might threaten the whole basis of the planned Far Eastern strategy. The fleet then despatched might arrive too late to save Singapore, or might, though in time for that, be too small to carry out a successful 'fleet-in-being' strategy. No assurance to Dominion Governments could possibly eliminate that uncertainty so long as a Two-Power Standard navy was itself considered as beyond achievement. Again, there can be little doubt that one of the reasons why the priority of the Far East over the Mediterranean could be so confidently asserted was that the details of a three-front war were little considered because such a war was itself thought to be militarily impossible to fight. But suppose Germany, Japan and Italy really did join together against us; and what if the threat of such a war expanded the scope and possibilities of a Mediterranean strategy? Would all this have no impact on the accepted principles? The events of the last few months before war broke out served to highlight these uncertainties and, in the process, to initiate proposals for a major change in naval plans.

Munich itself produced no immediate change. Soon after the settlement, in early October 1938, the Chiefs of Staff prepared a paper on the situation in the event of war against Germany in the

near future.⁽¹⁸⁾ It was admitted that the intervention of Italy on the side of Germany would '... by widening the theatre of operations to include the Mediterranean, ... very seriously embarrass France and Great Britain in the problem of combating Germany'. If, in addition, Japan intervened, it was made clear (as on several occasions previously) that it would be impossible to despatch an adequate naval force to the Far East and at the same time hold the eastern Mediterranean in any strength; in fact it would no longer be possible to control sea communications in the latter area. The Chiefs of Staff report continued:

'We wish to point out that, in these circumstances, unless the French Navy had assumed full responsibility for the western Mediterranean and for the Gibraltar area, Italy would have almost a free hand throughout the Mediterranean Sea. We should then have to rely for our security in the Middle East upon the Land and Air Forces already located there, until such time as it was possible to reinforce them via the Cape, or possibly via the overland route from Basrah.'

It was further pointed out that army reinforcements for the Middle East would be all the more necessary because of the deterioration of the situation in Palestine but they would almost certainly have to come from somewhere other than the United Kingdom; in addition, because all the available metropolitan strength of the R.A.F. would have to be devoted to operations against Germany, no reinforcements would be available for Imperial purposes and the defence of Egypt against Italian air attack would, therefore, be 'very weak'. If this particular paper did nothing more, it certainly underlined, by the very starkness of its presentation, that neither the present nor the projected strength of the country's defence forces was designed, even in company with allies, for war against Germany, Japan and Italy at the same time, and also that Britain's security in the Mediterranean still depended to a very considerable extent on her ability to maintain naval superiority there.

A sign of a major strategic change came in discussions on the Chiefs of Staff *European Appreciation 1939-40*, drawn up in February 1939,⁽¹⁹⁾ a paper which, with some amendments, was eventually to form the basis for Anglo-French staff talks and war plans in the spring and summer before war broke out. In that appreciation the Chiefs of Staff began by taking their stand firmly on the basis of what had now become established policy. 'If Japan joined our enemies' they wrote, 'a British Fleet would have to be despatched to the Far East, and only very reduced British light naval forces would remain in the Mediterranean'.⁽²⁰⁾ This, as we have already seen, would mean surrendering control of sea communications in the eastern Mediter-

anean to Italy. Naval action in the Far East based on Singapore would, it was agreed, give cover to Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa, as well as to Britain's position in the Indian Ocean. This was a strategy made clear so far throughout the inter-war years. And the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand relied primarily upon that strategy for their security. But, at the end of the section on the Far East, the Chiefs of Staff added the words, 'the strength of that fleet* must depend upon our resources and the state of the war in the European theatre'.⁽²¹⁾ This phrase was then fastened on to and quoted by the Prime Minister when the Appreciation was discussed by the C.I.D. at its meeting on 24th February.

'It would be noted', he said, 'that the assurance given to the Dominions that we should send an adequate Fleet to the Far East had been categorical and unqualified; whereas the effect of the passage which he had quoted was to suggest that, in certain circumstances, the strength of the Fleet which could be sent might not be adequate. It was for consideration whether the Dominions should be informed of the position.'⁽²²⁾

It is not clear why the Prime Minister took up this point as and when he did. While it is true that the claims of the Far East had so far been placed, categorically, above those of the Mediterranean, it had been accepted for some time past—as we have noted—that the claims of operations in home waters must come first. At least since the Chiefs of Staff annual review for 1935 it had been accepted, and never denied, that it was essential 'to maintain in all circumstances in home waters a force able to meet the requirements of a war with Germany'. Now, in the European Appreciation of 1939, the remark the Prime Minister apparently found disturbing followed immediately after a statement that, 'in the event of war with Japan we should send an adequate fleet to Eastern waters irrespective of the situation elsewhere'. Whether the Chiefs of Staff had introduced an ambiguity by not stating expressly that they regarded 'elsewhere' as synonymous only with the Mediterranean, or whether the Prime Minister had so far failed to see the unavoidable uncertainty with anything less than a Two-Power Standard navy, it is difficult to say.

Whatever the explanation, Mr. Chamberlain's intervention led to a discussion with a somewhat unexpected outcome. The new Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Lord Chatfield, was, and remained, a convinced supporter of the plan to send a major battle-fleet to the Far East even if that 'necessitated abandoning the eastern Mediterranean'. He argued that it would be sufficient to retain four of our own and five comparatively modern French

* i.e. to be based on Singapore.

capital ships in European waters to deal with Germany and Italy, thus leaving nine of our own capital ships for despatch to the Far East.^{(23)*} The French would have to be instructed in their part in such a strategy whether—or so the minutes of the meeting seem to imply—they liked it or not. Lord Stanhope, First Lord of the Admiralty since Mr. Duff Cooper's resignation after Munich, took a very different line. He was 'disturbed at the prospect of the Mediterranean being denuded of capital ships in the event of Japanese intervention', although he accepted that a promise had been given to the Dominions. He 'would prefer to send a much smaller force to the Far East', not least because 'it seemed unlikely that we could rely upon the French to take any action to cut Italian communications with Libya'. In his view 'even if we sent one or two capital ships to Singapore, they would constitute a deterrent to Japanese attack, particularly if the United States Fleet moved to Honolulu'. In this latter event the Japanese would be faced with the risk of having their fleet cut off from its bases were it to venture as far south as Singapore.⁽²⁴⁾

The accepted strategy of sending a major British battle-fleet to the Far East at the outbreak of war against Japan had not been challenged so openly before. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the C.I.D. failed to make any firm recommendation for or against Lord Stanhope's view. Instead, the Appreciation as a whole was referred to a Sub-Committee of Ministers and Chiefs of Staff for examination and report.† This Sub-Committee met during March and April and then, on 2nd May 1939, the C.I.D. considered its report in detail.⁽²⁶⁾ During its meetings the S.A.C. devoted a good deal of time to plans for the deployment of the fleet in the event of war and, as a vital part of that deployment, the relative claims of the various theatres in which operations were to be expected.⁽²⁷⁾ The weight of opinion now, in the spring of 1939, was beginning to be in favour of giving precedence to the Mediterranean over the Far East, and in that change of view the lead was apparently taken by the Admiralty. In a memorandum specially written for the S.A.C. on the question of the despatch of a fleet to the Far East the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, pointed out that while present and prospective naval strength was, in any case, inadequate for a war on three fronts, the situation

* This was calculated on the basis of 13 capital ships available, after refitting, by September 1939. Only a few weeks after Chatfield's estimate, the Chiefs of Staff claimed that 'the absolute minimum' of R.N. capital ships in home waters would be six and not four as suggested by Chatfield.

† Known as the Strategical Appreciation Sub-Committee (hereafter referred to as the S.A.C.) Its members were Lord Chatfield (Chairman), Sir John Anderson, Hore-Belisha, Lord Stanhope, Sir Kingsley Wood, W. S. Morrison and the Chiefs of Staff; Sir E. Bridges was Secretary.⁽²⁵⁾

in 1939 was about as bad as it could be, with only 10 out of 15 capital ships immediately available. The action which could be taken to counter the threat of simultaneous hostilities against three enemies depended upon a variety of factors, none of which could be accurately forecast well in advance. These factors included:

- (a) The number of capital ships available at the time;
- (b) The strategic situation both in Home Waters and in the Mediterranean;
- (c) The strategy adopted by Japan when she entered the war;
- (d) The reaction of the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. to Japan's intervention.

The memorandum by the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff continued:

'As already stated, we may have only ten capital ships immediately available when Japan intervenes. It is even possible that this number may have been reduced by fortuitous circumstances or by enemy action. In such circumstances the number of ships which could be spared from more vital areas to proceed to the East would necessarily be strictly limited. Should Japan's entry be delayed, the position should gradually improve, both in respect of the number of capital ships which we shall have available, and because we may have succeeded in reducing the enemy forces by successful action. It is not open to question that a capital ship force would have to be sent, but whether this could be done to the exclusion of our interests in the Mediterranean is a matter which would have to be decided at the time.

Japanese intervention may be designed to relieve the pressure which we are successfully imposing with our Fleet on Germany, Italy or both countries. In these circumstances some delay in the despatch of a Fleet to the Far East might enable us to eliminate one of these adversaries, thereby putting us in a position to direct our efforts against Japan in due course.

The courses of action open to Japan when she enters the war are numerous. It may be that she will content herself with threats and feints designed to draw off our main forces to the East without actually embarking upon an aggressive form of strategy affecting our vital interests in this area. A despatch of a Fleet in these circumstances would be playing Japan's game. It is desirable, therefore, to see what course of action Japan adopts before we relax our hold on other areas. Further, the effect of the evacuation of the eastern Mediterranean on Greece, Turkey and on the Arab and Moslem world are political

factors which make it essential that no precipitate action should be taken in this direction.

* * * * *

The conclusion which emerges from the foregoing consideration is that there are so many variable factors which cannot at present be assessed, that it is not possible to state definitely how soon after the Japanese intervention a Fleet could be despatched to the Far East. Neither is it possible to enumerate precisely the size of the Fleet that we could afford to send.⁽²⁹⁾

The S.A.C. after considering this memorandum, repeated the warning of the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff that, while it was the intention of the British Government to send a fleet to the Far East in the event of Japan entering the war, the decision on the strength and composition of that fleet, and its time of sailing, would be subject to a number of qualifying factors. Among those factors were that 'offensive operations in the Mediterranean against Italy offered the best prospects for speedy results and should not, therefore, be lightly broken off'. Further, emphasis was laid on the importance of affording moral and material support to such countries as Turkey, Greece and Egypt. And the conclusion was drawn that 'in planning operations in the Mediterranean, therefore, it should be assumed that the British Naval dispositions would be such as to enable the maximum pressure to be brought to bear on Italy so that, in co-operation with the French, the Italian Fleet could be driven from the sea and Italian communications with Libya severed. If Japan delayed entry into the war, it might be possible to establish a measure of control in the Mediterranean sufficient to allow of the immediate release of British forces for the Far East'.⁽²⁹⁾

The C.I.D. considered both the memorandum of the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, and the S.A.C.'s conclusions based on it, at their meeting on 2nd May 1939.⁽³⁰⁾ The conclusions already reached were reluctantly accepted. This was done with the frank admission both that 'there had been a considerable scaling down of our undertaking to the Dominions to send a fleet to the Far East in all circumstances', and that the new view expressed 'amounted to a reversal of the basis of calculation previously used for determining the scale of reserves necessary for Singapore'. The First Lord, Lord Stanhope, explained, as he understood it, why this change had come about. From what he said—and he spoke fairly briefly—it does not appear that the French were entirely responsible since, despite undoubted differences of view on priority of theatres, they had agreed that it was for the governments of the day to decide on the size of the fleet to be sent to the Far East and on how soon after Japan's intervention it could be sent. It was the situation in the Mediterranean and

Middle East which had changed most. As before, Britain had alliances with Egypt and Iraq but now, in addition, guarantees had been given to Greece, Roumania and Turkey.* In Lord Stanhope's view, if the fleet were moved from the Mediterranean there would be 'most serious repercussions in these countries'. The C.I.D. therefore decided that, in the light of the many variable factors it was impossible, at present, to assess either the size of the fleet which could be sent to the Far East after the outbreak of hostilities against Japan or exactly when it could be sent. The Government of the United States was to be informed of the considerations which had led to this decision and, in addition, the whole problem of the reserves and defensive organisation at Singapore would be looked at again.⁽³¹⁾†

These matters were taken a stage further a little later in the summer of 1939. On 16th June the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Lord Chatfield, asked the Chiefs of Staff to consider the military implications of any economic retaliatory measures which His Majesty's Government might decide to take in answer to the recent Japanese action against the Tientsin Concession. Among possible military consequences he explicitly mentioned was that of sending a fleet to the Far East and the relationship of such action to the strategy now being formulated by Britain and France for common action against Germany, Italy and, if necessary, Japan.⁽³²⁾‡

The Chiefs of Staff submitted two memoranda in reply. In the first they argued that the crux of the immediate problem in the current international situation was, so far as Britain was concerned, a naval one. And here the recent guarantees to Greece and Roumania, and the pact with Turkey, made it 'even more difficult to relinquish our control of the eastern Mediterranean'. Eleven capital ships were now immediately available and two more could be worked up to war readiness by the end of September. Without the active support of the United States of America, 'the decisive consideration', it would be necessary to send a fleet of not less than eight capital ships to the Far East if economic measures against Japan were to be backed by adequate force—and even then this fleet would have one less capital ship than Japan had in Far Eastern waters. Home waters must come first, and that meant at least six capital ships to meet any threat from Germany. In addition three capital

* See below, Chapter XVIII.

† Earlier discussions, which now came to a climax at this meeting of the C.I.D. had already caused some consternation in the India Office, and the Viceroy of India was informed at this point, that the Government of India could not count upon any naval reinforcements from Home Waters for an indefinite period after the outbreak of war.⁽³²⁾

‡ See above, p. 417 and below, pp. 429-30.

ships would be required to control the eastern Mediterranean, on the assumption that responsibility for control of the western basin would be taken over by France. That left only two capital ships for the Far East.

'Having regard', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'to the limited results which a force, including only two capital ships, can hope to achieve in the Far East, we reach the conclusion that, without the active co-operation of the United States of America, it would not be justifiable, from the military point of view, having regard to the international situation, to take any avoidable action which might lead to hostilities with Japan. On the other hand if we were unfortunately to find ourselves at war with Japan, without the active co-operation of the United States of America, it would be essential for us to take what steps we could to protect our sea communications in the Indian Ocean against raids. . . . In these circumstances, we should be prepared to recommend the despatch of two capital ships to the East.

The situation would, however, be completely altered if we could be assured of the active co-operation of the United States of America in Far Eastern waters. In this connection, the mere presence of the American Fleet on the West Coast of America, or even at Honolulu (3,400 miles from Japan), would not of itself provide the necessary deterrent to a Japanese movement to the southward. If, however, their active support were assured, we are of opinion that the reinforcement of the China Fleet by two capital ships to co-operate with the Americans would be a proper strategic measure.'⁽³⁴⁾

This report was laid before the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet on 19th June. Arising out of the Committee's discussion the Chiefs of Staff were asked to elucidate some points further and, in particular, 'to give further consideration to the strength of the fleet which in present circumstances might be despatched to the Far East'.⁽³⁵⁾ In fact, it looks as though the Chiefs of Staff were being pressed to reconsider at any rate some of their earlier views largely because the Tientsin crisis made it seem possible that Japan might choose to go to war independently of events in Europe. In their second paper, however, the Chiefs of Staff still put the demands of home waters first, and still argued that at least six capital ships were necessary for that purpose. They were now prepared to recommend a fleet with only seven capital ships as adequate for a defensive strategy in the Far East, and seven would be available by September. That, of course, would completely denude the eastern Mediterranean of British capital ships and, as a consequence, both make it impossible to interrupt Italy's communications with North Africa and make possible a heavier Italian attack against Egypt. Further,

the political results in the whole Middle East of such a move would be considerable.

The Chiefs of Staff refused to go further than that in recommending a clear order of priorities. But they did end their second paper on an important note of caution.

'We consider it essential', they wrote, 'that, before any decision is taken to denude the Mediterranean of capital ships, we should consult the French. In the recent Staff Conversations a Paper on the intervention of Japan . . . was agreed with some difficulty, since the points of view of the two Delegations were somewhat opposed. After reviewing the arguments for and against the Far East or the Mediterranean position, the agreed conclusion was:

"It must be for His Majesty's Government to decide in consultation with the French government at the time on the redistribution of British naval forces to meet the situation with which the Allies are faced."

Although these words referred to Allied consultation during war, it is considered that we are morally bound to consult the French Government even in time of peace.'⁽³⁶⁾

While the Chiefs of Staff expressed their views, as they had in effect been asked to do, as a comparison between the fleet requirements of the Mediterranean and the Far East, a somewhat different comparison was made at the ensuing C.I.D. discussion.⁽³⁷⁾ It then became clear that, even if a major fleet was sent to the Far East, it would still be smaller than the Admiralty considered desirable and that because of the competing demands of Home Waters. It was now clear that at least six capital ships must be retained in Home Waters and even that would be 'cutting it fine'. Indeed, Lord Chatfield, who had all along fought the case for a strong fleet based on Singapore, admitted that even six capital ships might prove insufficient to protect our shipping in Home Waters from surface attack, particularly if we could not count on the co-operation of the French battle-cruisers in the Atlantic. The Foreign Secretary's view was that Britain should 'shorten her line' in the Far East, i.e. reduce the number of commitments by withdrawing forces from Peking and Tientsin and also gun-boats. Such a policy would mean considerable humiliation now, but would reduce the chances of further and perhaps continuous humiliation later.

The Joint Anglo-French Staff talks of 1939 are considered in detail elsewhere.* The only part of those discussions relevant here is that which concerns the overall distribution of the Allies' naval

* See below, Chapter XVII.

strength should war break out between them on the one hand and Germany, Italy and Japan on the other. The intervention of Japan was not considered in the first part of these discussions, but did come up for detailed consideration at the second stage.⁽³⁸⁾ On this problem the French attitude was to plan to confine operations in the Far East to the defensive, and to rely on the U.S.S.R. and particularly on the U.S.A. to contain Japan until such time as Italy had been defeated. They drew attention to the danger of British naval forces leaving the Mediterranean until the latter object was achieved. The British delegation, while agreeing on the importance of naval control of the eastern Mediterranean, also drew attention to the far-reaching British responsibilities in the Far East.

In the end, agreed recommendations were drawn up by the two delegations. These were approved by the Chiefs of Staff and forwarded, for notification, to the C.I.D. Clearly, Japan's intervention, because of her naval strength, would introduce a serious threat to Allied interests in the Far East. In this area Britain's interests were predominant. Unless restrained by the U.S.A. and/or the U.S.S.R., Japan must be expected to undertake operations which could be countered only by Allied naval action. Such action depended upon the availability of a suitable base in the area and that meant Singapore. Singapore, it was agreed, was 'vital for the prosecution of Allied defence policy, and is the key to the strategical situation in the Indian Ocean, Far East and Australasia'. Singapore, however, could not hold out indefinitely. It followed, therefore, that although, in view of Allied preoccupation in the West, strategy in the Far East must at first be defensive, yet the Allies must be prepared at some time to send naval reinforcements against Japan. The many incalculable factors present in the situation made it impossible to decide definitely how soon after Japan entered the war these reinforcements would be sent or in what strength. On the other hand, if the Allies were defeated in the west, the collapse of their position in the Far East would automatically follow: and they must, moreover, consider both their guarantees to the East Mediterranean Powers and the hope that operations against Italy would offer the best prospects of early results. It was thus a question, as with purely British calculations, of balancing risks. Anglo-French plans must provide for a number of possible situations, including the two extremes—the practical abandonment, temporarily, of naval control in the Far East or in the eastern Mediterranean. But, ran the joint report, 'the weakening of the British Eastern Mediterranean Fleet should not be lightly undertaken'.⁽³⁹⁾

Arising from these talks, an Anglo-French conference was held at Singapore from 22nd-27th June 1939, to discuss joint operations in the Far East. Instructions sent to the delegates listed the security of

Singapore as first in importance in that theatre, and included a warning that, initially, Allied naval forces in the Far East might not exceed their peace-time strength.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The Conference first discussed the position of the Far East in a purely European war, pointed out the risks of relying on the transport of reinforcements once there was a possibility of enemy attack and urged that these reinforcements should reach Malaya before such a possibility existed. They went as far as to suggest the despatch of Army reinforcements now because of the general world situation. They then analysed plans for the defence of Singapore. The Army plan was to secure the fortress against enemy bombardment of the naval and air bases from the sea and air, against hostile landing attacks from the sea and against an overland advance from outside the fortress area; to secure Penang against attack and to protect airfields and rail communications elsewhere in Malaya; finally to guard against raids by enemy forces which might have penetrated into Siam. The naval plan still envisaged basing the China Fleet on Singapore at the outbreak of war together with any reinforcements sent out. The principal rôles of the R.A.F. would be the location and attack of Japanese vessels and the prevention of the establishment of air and naval bases within air range of Singapore. The Conference thought the local air defence, even with the reinforcements from India, 'grossly inadequate', and considered that there should be at least three more general reconnaissance and three more bomber squadrons: another fighter squadron would also add materially to Singapore's security.

Finally, commenting on the position generally once war had broken out with Japan, the Conference put on record their 'grave concern' at the present inadequacy of Allied naval and air forces in the Far East. This placed the Japanese in a position of such superiority that we could neither assure our essential communications nor prevent enemy occupation of advanced bases directly threatening our vital interests. As it seemed impossible to station adequate naval forces in the Far East in peace-time, appreciably larger air forces permanently stationed there formed the only practical solution and were regarded by the Conference as of 'paramount importance'.⁽⁴¹⁾

Thus matters remained until the outbreak of war. It would be going too far to claim that the last few months of peace saw a complete and unquestioned reversal in the order of priority as between the Mediterranean and the Far East in plans for the war deployment of the Royal Navy should Britain find herself at war against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. There were too many uncertainties, both hopes and fears, to make fixed plans advisable or possible. On the other hand, the Mediterranean, for the first time, was accorded a place of major importance in planning and, equally for the first time, the possibility or necessity of sacrificing Britain's position in the



Far East was openly discussed. Moreover, in so far as plans had now, for safety's sake, to be drawn up on an Allied basis, it is clear that French pressure was being exerted—should the worst happen—to give precedence to the war against Italy.

To conclude this part of the story, on 1st June 1939 the Chiefs of Staff recommended as an interim measure the extension of the period before the relief of Singapore to 90 days. This was the outcome of investigations dating back to February 1939, originally arising from the European Appreciation and made the more urgent by the new decision about the despatch of the Fleet to the Far East. The reconsideration of the whole Singapore defence organisation necessitated by this latter decision was not yet finished and, until it was complete, the Chiefs of Staff did not feel able to make any firm recommendations for the precise period for which reserves should be held at Singapore for long-term purposes. Nevertheless they were already confident that the existing period before relief of 70 days should be increased by not less than 20.

On 6th July the C.I.D. considered and approved the interim measures recommended to them by the Chiefs of Staff.⁽⁴²⁾ Longer-term matters were postponed until the conclusion of a new Far East appreciation and that, as it turned out, was still unfinished when war began.

3. *Home Waters and the Protection of Sea-borne Trade, 1938-39*

Despite the numerous appreciations, and the great deal of time in discussion devoted to the world-wide deployment of the Royal Navy, Ministers and their advisers were well aware that all this rested upon the initial assumption of the security of the home base. In other words, imperial defence depended upon the successful defence of the British Isles and the sea routes which supplied so much of Britain's food and raw materials. When considering the defence of Britain and her sea routes there was one obvious and vitally important factor which had not had to be taken into calculation before 1914—air power. In a number of major appreciations drawn up in the years 1936-39 dealing with plans for war against Germany the threat of air attack against Britain's cities, ports and supply routes, and the possible counter-measures, occupy first place; and not surprisingly, since the normal assumption was that Germany would try to get a military decision by a short war. But if the formerly exclusive responsibilities of the Royal Navy in this context had been reduced, what remained was still of critical importance.⁽⁴³⁾

In their European Appreciation of February 1939, the Chiefs of Staff estimated the fleet strengths of the world's naval powers in the spring of that year as follows:⁽⁴⁴⁾

Table 11
Estimate of Fleet Strengths, April 1939, comparing
Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan

| | British Empire | France | Germany | Italy | Japan | Anglo- French Total | German- Italian- Japanese Total |
|--|-------------------|--------|---------|-------|-------|---------------------------|--|
| Capital Ships . | 12(a) | 7(b) | 2 | 2 | 10 | 19 | 14 |
| Armoured Ships . | ... | ... | 3 | ... | ... | ... | 3 |
| Aircraft Carriers . | 6(c) | 1 | ... | ... | 6 | 7 | 6 |
| 8-in. Gun Cruisers | 14(d) | 7 | 2 | 7 | 12 | 21 | 21 |
| 6-in. Gun Cruisers | 40(f) | 11 | 6 | 15 | 25 | 51 | 46 |
| Contre-Torpilleurs | ... | 32 | ... | ... | ... | 32 | ... |
| Large Destroyers (1,500-1,850 tons) | 16 | ... | 20 | 23 | 31 | 16 | 74 |
| Other Modern Destroyers . | 81 | 38 | 24 | 64 | 52 | 119 | 140 |
| Older Destroyers and TBs . | 48 | 2 | 6 | 39 | 39 | 50 | 84 |
| Submarines . | 54 | 80 | 57 | 105 | 62 | 134 | 224 |
| Motor Torpedo Boats . | 18 | 10 | 20 | 60(e) | 3 | 28 | 83 |
| Escort Vessels . | 30 | 25 | 10 | 9 | ... | 55 | 19 |
| A/A Ships . | 4 | ... | ... | ... | ... | 4 | ... |

- (a) Of these *Hood* and *Revenge* might be at 1-2 months' notice. Three other ships not included in this number were undergoing large repairs and modernisation.
- (b) Two of them old.
- (c) One of these employed in training duties, and maintenance personnel and aircraft would not be available for equipping all these ships.
- (d) One other undergoing large repairs in Australia.
- (e) There were 60 in commission, of which only about 40 were modern seaworthy boats. In addition, there are up to 300 boats capable of carrying torpedoes and a small gun.
- (f) Of these, 4 would be at more than 14 days' notice.

From these figures it is clear that in a war against Germany and Italy, and particularly if Germany continued to observe the terms of the Anglo-German naval agreement of 1935, Britain could expect to control the North Sea and to provide a fleet for the eastern Mediterranean without difficulty. If Germany were to denounce the 1935 agreement, as she soon did, then Britain would be unable to keep pace with Germany and Japan in new warship production, largely

because of armour and armament shortages. Nonetheless, as seen in the spring of 1939, the picture was a favourable one for Britain. For the immediate future Germany would be so inferior in major units that she would surely be unwilling to either face a fleet action or attempt a sea-borne invasion of the British Isles. Whatever their merits, vessels of the *Deutschland* class would be quite unable to stand up to our capital ships. In other words, it would not pay Germany to keep her fleet concentrated.⁽⁴⁵⁾ To that extent, so it was argued, the naval situation was much simpler than it had been before 1914.

But what of the problem of the protection of sea-borne trade? The basis of such protection would be the deployment of the main fleet 'where it could give covering protection to British shipping against attack by the fleets of the enemy', and this meant, in practice, maintaining the security of shipping in the Atlantic and the Western Approaches. Under the cover of the main fleet, cruisers and small craft would give direct protection to shipping against attacks by separate units or detachments of the enemy's forces; and there could be, as there had so often been in the past, some competition between the needs of the main fleet and those of the forces provided for the direct protection of sea-borne trade.

The naval threat to sea-borne trade would come from submarines and surface vessels. First the submarine threat. In the light of the experience of the First World War, and with the hindsight of those who can look back upon the events of 1940-43, the Admiralty's forecasts of the submarine threat in the pre-war years are surprising. In October 1938 it was estimated that—

'Should Germany make vigorous use of her available submarine forces, our counter-measures should enable us to prevent her from obtaining any marked success even by unrestricted warfare, although we must expect losses in the initial stages.'⁽⁴⁶⁾

Four months later there was, it is true, less optimism.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Germany's submarine forces, though limited, might well do serious damage in the Western Approaches and the narrow seas, particularly if linked with air attacks. If Germany resorted to unrestricted submarine warfare—and this was not expected at the outset of hostilities—convoy would be adopted, otherwise evasive routeing would be more commonly used, as with the threat of surface attack.⁽⁴⁸⁾ But if convoy had to be adopted a total of 107 escort vessels—destroyers and escort and patrol vessels—would be needed in the vicinity of the United Kingdom and, in April 1939, less than half that number were available. There was, moreover, a serious shortage of anti-submarine aircraft. In April 1939 less than half the necessary aircraft were

available for duty in Home Waters, and none at all for reconnaissance duties at the Atlantic, South Africa and Red Sea convoy ports which needed, on paper, a total of 124 aircraft. Nevertheless, it was expected that 'with the passage of time . . . and the development of counter-measures, the scale of naval attack would certainly diminish, and must in the long run be brought to a standstill', with the result that Germany, 'with her present limited naval strength, cannot therefore expect to achieve any vital result by naval action against our overseas trade'.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The evidence suggests that the Admiralty was rather more anxious about surface than about submarine attack. It was assumed that the success of surface raiders in the early months of the 1914-18 war would prompt the Germans to try again. One of the problems here was that if Germany avoided a fleet action and chose, instead, to use her newest vessels to break out on to the sea routes, then considerable dispersion of our own forces would be needed to protect shipping in the threatened areas. These new vessels, though unlikely to risk facing Britain's capital ships, would be more than a match for cruisers and escorts engaged on convoy duties. It was true that 'fast naval forces based on Scapa Flow, assisted by air and submarine reconnaissance, would be well placed to intercept and bring to action German forces attempting to break out of the North Sea'.⁽⁵⁰⁾ But it was unlikely that the Germans would allow us the same freedom to use intercepted W/T signals as they had done during the First World War. It was also true that Germany had no overseas bases, leaving her raiders to fuel in neutral ports or from neutral or allied vessels intercepted at sea. Nevertheless, the *Deutschland* class ships could steam for 40 days without fresh fuel supplies, and it was known that they had recently been engaged in refuelling exercises with fast oil tankers.

To make matters worse there was as serious a shortage of escort vessels against surface as against submarine attack. It was estimated that 45 cruisers and 5 aircraft carriers would be needed for the trade routes in addition to those working with the main fleet; in the spring of 1939 only 22 cruisers were available. Moreover, many more armed merchant cruisers were still required. As a result, in the early stages of war it would be possible to maintain protective forces only in the most important local areas, e.g. the Western Approaches, the Straits of Dover and some of the focal areas in the Atlantic, a situation which the Chiefs of Staff moderately described as 'not satisfactory' and as necessitating a large increase in all types of escort vessel. Nonetheless, the Chiefs of Staff were hopeful that surface, as well as submarine attack would gradually be brought under control and, ultimately, to a standstill.

So far as offensive naval operations were concerned the prospect

was one of slow attrition. While there might be some success from air attacks on German naval bases, little was expected from naval bombardment of German ports or from operations in the North Sea, and naval operations in the Baltic would not justify the risks involved. Economic blockade was the main offensive weapon of British sea-power and it was a slow acting one. Close blockade was out of the question. But a system of contraband control, as in the First World War, could be operated, and was expected to be the chief naval weapon for exerting pressure upon Germany. Well before war began completed plans were ready to be put into immediate operation for the setting up of a world-wide contraband control service providing for control bases and naval patrols. Lists of absolute and conditional contraband had been brought up to date, and the problem of the rationing of neutrals had been discussed at length.⁽⁵¹⁾

Finally, there was one subject on which the Chiefs of Staff repeatedly laid heavy emphasis—the importance of the contribution of air power both to Germany's threat to our command of the sea and also to our own counter-measures. As early as February 1937 they stated as their first recommendation in a paper entitled 'Planning for War with Germany' that:

'... in preparing plans, the Joint Staffs should bear in mind that effective air reconnaissance over the North Sea is essential for the successful work of the Fleet, and for other purposes, and that this is a priority requirement.'⁽⁵²⁾

In their European Appreciation of February 1939 the Chiefs of Staff hammered this point home. 'Air attack on our shipping in ports', they stated, 'presents one of the gravest menaces to our sea-borne trade', particularly on the east and south coasts of the United Kingdom. There was a related, and equally serious threat to our shipping in waters adjacent to the enemy's air bases. In areas where evasive routeing was not possible there would be no alternative to putting merchant ships into convoy escorted by vessels with heavy A/A armament, and the main source of such vessels would be converted old cruisers and destroyers. It was estimated that, in Home Waters alone, 20 converted cruisers and 40 other vessels with heavy A/A armament would be needed; in April 1939 only 10 such ships were available for Home Waters and all other areas. In view of this situation, and of the consequent risk of reduced food supplies, the Chiefs of Staff stated that they attached 'the greatest importance to the early completion of adequate plans for the diversion and distribution of trade through the Western ports, so that we may be fully prepared for any emergency', and that despite the fact that such diversion would throw a further strain upon a distribution

system which was, itself, likely to be a prime object of enemy air attack.*⁽⁵³⁾

Table 12⁽⁵⁴⁾

Probable British Naval Dispositions, April 1939

These dispositions would be completed when the ships of the Reserve Fleet had commissioned and worked up, about one month after mobilisation was ordered.

Home Fleet

- 4 Battleships
- 2 Battle Cruisers
- 1 or 2 Aircraft Carriers
- 2 8-inch-gun Cruisers
- 9 6-inch-gun Cruisers (4 old)
- 1 A/A Ship
- 25 Destroyers
- 7 Minesweepers
- 2 Depot Ships

Northern Patrol

- 25 Armed Merchant Cruisers

NOTE—The Northern Patrol will be carried out by such units of the Home Fleet as are available between Z and Z+14. From Z+14 until Armed Merchant Cruisers are available, the patrol will be carried out by Reserve Cruisers.

Channel Force

- 2 Battleships
- 3 or 4 6-inch-gun Cruisers (old)
- 8 Destroyers

Harwich-Dover Force

- 9 Destroyers
- 1 Large Minelayer and 9 Minelaying Destroyers

Submarine Force (based on Blyth, Aberdeen)

- 21 Submarines
- 2 Depot Ships

Trade Protection and A/S

- 2 A/A Ships
- 33 Destroyers
- 9 Escort Vessels
- 7 Patrol Vessels

NOTE—Of the above, approximately 18 escorts will be required for the Field Force Convoys, if sent.

* For last minute pre-war preparations to defend shipping against surface, submarine and air attack, see below, Chapter XVII, Section 4.

Mediterranean

- 3 Battleships
- 1 Aircraft Carrier
- 5 8-inch-gun Cruisers
- 9 6-inch-gun Cruisers (4 old)
- 42 Destroyers (including 1 Flotilla of Tribals)
- 10 Submarines
- 12 M.T.Bs.
- 12 Minesweepers
- 1 Escort Vessel
- 3 Depot Ships

NOTE

(1) Of the above, the following will be required to be based on Gibraltar:

- 1 Destroyer Flotilla
- 3 Submarines
- 2 Minesweepers

(2) One Division of Tribals or Destroyers will be required to reinforce Red Sea Force.

(3) Of the above, 7 Submarines and 12 M.T.Bs. would be based on Malta.

Red Sea Force (including Somali Coast Force)

- 3 6-inch-gun Cruisers
- 1 A/A Ship
- 1 Destroyer Flotilla ($\frac{1}{2}$ Mediterranean; $\frac{1}{2}$ China)
- 4 Submarines
- 9 Escort Vessels
- 3 R.I.N. Sloops
- 6 M.T.Bs. (if available)

NOTE—The half flotilla of Destroyers will remain with Commander-in-Chief, China, until convoy of troops from India to Singapore is completed.

China

- 2 8-inch-gun Cruisers
- 2 6-inch-gun Cruisers
- 1 Aircraft Carrier
- $\frac{1}{2}$ Flotilla Destroyers
- 4 Escort Vessels
- 11 Submarines
- 9 Minesweepers
- 18 Gunboats
- 1 Depot Ship

North Atlantic (based on Gibraltar)

- 3 6-inch gun Cruisers (old)

See also Note (1) under Mediterranean. The Cruisers will be available for employment elsewhere in Atlantic if found necessary.

South Atlantic

Cape Verde Force

1 8-inch-gun and 1 6-inch-gun Cruiser

Freetown: 2 Escort Vessels

Pernambuco Force:

1 8-inch-gun and 1 6-inch-gun Cruiser

America and West Indies

Halifax Force:

2 8-inch-gun Cruisers, R.C.N. Destroyers

West Indies Force: 2 6-inch-gun Cruisers

Persian Gulf

3 Escort Vessels

Australia

1 8-inch-gun Cruiser

1 6-inch-gun Cruiser

5 Destroyers

2 Escort Vessels

New Zealand

1 6-inch-gun Cruiser

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- (42) C.I.D. 364th Mtg. (6) 431
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- (52) D.P.(P)2, para. 15; see also C.O.S. 552 435
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PART III

CHAPTER XII

THE ROLE OF THE ARMY: LIMITED LIABILITY, 1936-38

1. *The Regular Army and the Territorial Forces: The Problem of Reinforcement, 1936-37*

WHILE, IN THE PERIOD between the spring of 1936 and the autumn of 1939 the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force went through a period of expansion and modernisation—even although the process was sometimes slow and at other times erratic—the fortunes of the Army were altogether less happy. This was a period in which the Army became the ‘Cinderella’ Service. At the time of Germany’s military reoccupation of the Rhineland it still appeared possible that the Army, in addition to its responsibilities for home and imperial defence, would be given the responsibility, should the need arise, of sending to the Continent an expeditionary force to implement Britain’s guarantees under the Treaty of Locarno and to preserve that security of the Low Countries which had for so long been a major preoccupation of Britain’s foreign and defence policy. There was clearly evident in the discussions between Ministers and officials, even then, an unwillingness to be too specific about such commitments; and throughout 1936 and 1937 opposition to anything which might commit Britain to a strategy similar to that of 1914—similar, that is, in terms of contributing a large army—gathered strength. Quite apart from military and emotional reasons against a repetition of a Continental commitment such as that which had led to the trench warfare of 1914-18 there was the further objection that, certainly against a background of ‘business as usual’, it was in fact impossible to re-equip and modernise all three Services on a major scale at the same time. By the end of 1937 the combination of these restraining influences had succeeded in relegating preparations for a possible Continental campaign to the lowest priority among the Army’s responsibilities. That remained true until after Munich. 1938 as a whole was a period of ‘limited liability’ so far as the Army was concerned. And only in the early spring of 1939, six months before war broke out, was the Government forced to retrace its steps and to begin to plan for an

Army capable of making a major contribution to the land defence of the Low Countries and France in a strategy which, in principle, repeated that of the First World War.

In its recommendations concerning the Army, the D.R.C., in November 1935, made several modest proposals and one major one. Coast defence of ports at home and abroad was to be increased from an annual charge of £325,000 to £525,000. Some larger, but still modest provision was recommended for the Air Defence of Great Britain. The raising of four new infantry battalions was proposed as the practicable alternative to the fourteen considered ideally desirable.⁽¹⁾ These proposals and others of a comparable kind, were accepted by the revising D.P.R. and, subsequently, by the Cabinet.⁽²⁾

The fate of the one major proposal was, however, very different. Foremost among the Committee's recommendations, as we have already seen, was that concerning the provision of a Field Force 'from Home in time of emergency or war with adequate equipment and reserves'.^{(3)*}

So far as this particular item was concerned the Committee's report was quite explicit, arguing that—

'... the most important requirement is to organise a Field Force which can be sent abroad at short notice for the protection of our vital interests, and to enable us to honour our international obligations, particularly under the Treaty of Locarno, which would involve effective co-operation with other signatories on the Continent of Europe. This includes the occupation for ourselves and the denial to the enemy of advanced air bases in the Low Countries.'⁽⁴⁾

And the counterpart to this view was contained in the warning that,

'... our long-range policy should be so aligned that we can never get into a position where we would not have a certainty of French military support in the event of war...'⁽⁵⁾

The detailed proposals for the Field Force recommended an initial Regular force of five divisions together with supporting troops, a contingent of 155,000 men in all, to be made available for assistance to Continental allies 'within a fortnight of the outbreak of war'. Reinforcements were then to be provided by the twelve divisions of the Territorial Army, these latter to be fully equipped on a modern scale, and available for despatch over the first eight months of hostilities.† The financial outlay needed to modernise the twelve

* See above, pp. 261-63.

† These items are given in more detail on p. 262 above.

divisions of the Territorial Army to give them the necessary material to take part in modern warfare was estimated at £26 million. Of this it was recommended that about £2 million be spent in the three financial years 1936-38, and the rest from 1939 onwards.⁽⁶⁾

Finally, the estimated cost of the Field Force as a whole (including Territorial reinforcements as described above) amounted to more than two-thirds of the total capital expenditure proposed for the Army over the next five years.⁽⁷⁾

When Ministers considered these recommendations concerning the Field Force, first in Committee⁽⁸⁾ and then in full Cabinet,⁽⁹⁾ they went a long way with their officials, with one important exception. That exception concerned the proposals for the twelve Territorial divisions to constitute carefully timed reinforcements for the Regular Field Force. Both the Secretary of State for War, Mr. Duff Cooper, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, supported the undoubtedly ambitious proposals for the Territorial Army on two grounds. First, that if the Regular contingent were called upon to take part in a Continental war it was essential that it should be backed up by further formations as soon as possible. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff argued that it was precisely the lack of such a planned reinforcement which had rendered the situation of the original Expeditionary Force precarious in the winter of 1914-15. Second, it was important for the Territorials themselves to know what their future rôle was going to be; and absence of this knowledge adversely affected recruiting. The peace-time establishment of the Territorial Army was approximately 140,000 but, at present, there was a shortage of about 40,000 without taking into account the future needs for the Air Defence of Great Britain.

The arguments advanced against a complete plan for the Territorial Army on the lines recommended were varied and were not presented in any way as the product of agreement on all the relevant points among the Ministers concerned. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was the most clearly and unequivocally opposed and was anxious to do no more than continue the annual sum of £250,000 already provided. Others took the line that there might well be undesirable political reactions if it were announced that the rôle of the Territorial Force would be to take part in a future European war; domestic public opinion might react violently against such an idea. Further, the Prime Minister argued that since production capacity was not at present available for so ambitious a re-equipment plan for the Territorial Army, then there was a strong case for postponing further consideration of this part of the Army plan and of re-examining it in the light of developments in two or three years' time. At that later date the Government would be better able to appreciate the

industrial position and also the demands of the international situation as a whole.⁽¹⁰⁾

The Cabinet, as we have seen, finally decided to proceed along these latter lines and announced the broad outlines of its programme for the Army, together with those for the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, in the Statement Relating to Defence for 1936. The Regular Army, it was stated, had a responsibility 'to provide a properly equipped force ready to proceed overseas wherever it may be wanted'. For this purpose it was 'urgently necessary that the Army formations already existing should be organised in the most effective form and equipped with the most modern armament and material, together with adequate reserves of ammunition and stores'. While pointing out that the Territorial Army 'actually provides the first line in anti-aircraft and coast defence at home', the official statement added that 'it is recruited on the basis that it will be ready to serve wherever it may be needed, and if the Regular Army should require support abroad, the Territorial Army will be called upon to give that support, serving not as drafts but in its own units and formations'. Recruiting for the Territorial Army was to be encouraged. And although it could not be reconditioned for the moment because of the prior demands of the Regular Army on limited industrial output, a beginning would be made 'at once in the task of improving its present inadequate equipment and training'.⁽¹¹⁾ In effect, this meant that what was to be done for the Territorial Army would be the same as before.

In December 1936, however, Mr. Duff Cooper re-opened the whole question of the rôle of the Army.⁽¹²⁾ By its decisions of the previous February the Cabinet, he argued, were committed to the principle of a Field Army of five Regular and twelve Territorial divisions, and the only reason for postponing the equipment of the Territorial divisions was the doubt whether any substantial progress could be made with it until the equipment of the Regular Army had first been completed. He emphasised that the Territorial Army was an integral part of the British Army as a whole. In addition to its home defence obligations it had a definite foreign service liability;⁽¹³⁾ it might, for example, be necessary to reinforce garrisons throughout the Empire with Territorial regiments in a war of any magnitude. These obligations could not be met unless the Territorial Army was properly equipped 'ready to serve wherever it may be needed'; and that capability further implied that Territorial units would be available to support the Regular Army as rapidly as circumstances should 'require and permit'. Finally when the Cabinet in the previous February had decided to reserve for three years a decision on the full reconditioning of the Territorial Force, it had done so with the qualification that '... if, contrary to expectation, it should be found

possible to make a start with the Territorial Force side of re-equipment before the end of three years, there would be no objection to a re-opening of the question with a view to fresh decision'.

According to the Secretary of State, limitations of industrial capacity were no longer as serious as they had been. The Director General of Munitions Production considered that it was now possible to make a start with equipping and modernising the Territorial Army, and that if it was desired to prepare for the use of at least a portion of the Territorial Army within the next two years then steps must be taken forthwith to provide the necessary expansion of production capacity. The claim was not that the necessary output was immediately available, but rather that it would be created if due notice were given and that 'without the extravagant expenditure and interference with industry that would be involved in emergency measures'. If a start could be made now on the re-equipment of the Territorial Army it would, by broadening the basis of supply, assist in the solution of the problem of war potential for an army on mobilisation. If the process of equipment were postponed, and left to be carried out together with normal maintenance after the declaration of war, the national resources then available would be insufficient to bear the double strain. What was wanted, therefore, was peace-time equipment and such mobilisation equipment and reserves as would enable Territorial Army formations to take the field at the earliest date that the training of personnel would allow. The programme of equipment must necessarily be spread over a period of years and, even if authority was now given to proceed with it, there was no hope of completing more than a small part of the process by 1939. Therefore, the sooner a start was made, the sooner the job would be completed.⁽¹⁴⁾

The immediate answer to the Secretary of State came from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Chamberlain. The Chancellor, like Duff Cooper, argued on general grounds and did not give figures to support or oppose the opinion of the Director of Munitions Production. Mr. Chamberlain agreed that if it were possible to consider the scale of Army efforts in isolation from other defence preparations, then there was much to be said for the Secretary of State's view. But, he went on, 'it is necessary, in determining the rôle which our Army can be called upon to play, to consider the parts played by the other two Services, and the effect upon our industrial organisation of the present programme for remedying our defence deficiencies'. The Navy remained the first line of defence in preserving sea communications. For this reason we had always put the maintenance of a strong Fleet before the maintenance of a large Army, and we must continue to do so. The Navy, however, was no longer of itself sufficient to provide adequate national defence; a strong Air

Force, capable of dealing a powerful blow against an enemy and therefore affording a strong deterrent against any attack upon us, was essential unless the country was to be at the mercy of another European power. Together with these considerations went the need for the maximum defence against air attack and that included that part of the Territorial Army providing anti-aircraft defence.

'These needs', wrote the Chancellor, 'have first claim. Looking at the matter from a practical point of view, the essential point is whether our resources (skilled labour, industrial organisation, finance and imports) can cope effectively with the whole task, in addition to the equipment required for seventeen divisions ready to take an effective part in Continental war.

In this connection it must be borne in mind that, if we are to send seventeen divisions overseas on, or shortly after, the outbreak of war, we must also take into account the effect upon the supply position. We should have to maintain in peace-time, as a permanent commitment, largely increased reserve stores of all kinds, and an increased capacity for munitions production, in order that the seventeen divisions might be continuously supplied from soon after the outbreak of war. . . .

Work has been in progress for a few months only upon the defence programme; but already there are signs of shortages or impending shortages of skilled labour, already, too, there are symptoms that our exports are slackening, notwithstanding favourable trade tendencies; and it is only too clear that overseas trade once lost will not be easy to recover. Again, within but a few months of the Cabinet having approved a comprehensive scheme of rearmament which represented the results of many months of preparation, it has been found necessary to seek authority for additions to the approved programme, of which the cost is in the neighbourhood of £100 million, while the total of Defence Estimates for 1937 seems likely to exceed the forecast given to the Cabinet in February last by £70 million. . . .

All this tends to indicate that the execution of the programme approved in February which included the re-equipment of five Regular Divisions, only is as much as our resources can at present stand; and that to add to that programme any substantial degree of re-equipment of the Territorial Force would only result in the breakdown of the whole scheme.'

Even if it were possible to find the resources to do all or part of what the Secretary of State was asking for, would that, asked the Chancellor, in fact be the best way to use them? Would it not be far better, given our geographical position, 'to devote a correspondingly larger proportion of our available resources to the Air Arm than is the case with Continental Powers . . . the rate of expenditure on

munitions of war of all kinds by modern armies in the field is so great that we should probably attain a far greater degree of strength by concentrating on air strength than we could attain if we were now to devote a considerable proportion of our energies to the re-equipment of a larger military force.*

Finally there was the political aspect of the problem. While it was likely that a Britain possessing a large army as well as a powerful navy and air force would have much influence on the Continent, yet it should not be forgotten that—in the Chancellor's words—'the political temper of people in this country is strongly opposed to Continental adventures'. He went on:

'Although when the time comes they may, as in 1914, be persuaded that intervention by us is inevitable, they will be strongly suspicious of any preparation made in peace-time with a view to large-scale military operations on the Continent, and they will regard such preparations as likely to result in our being entangled in disputes which do not concern us.

Opinions will, no doubt differ, as to whether or not this almost instinctive aversion from large-scale military preparations corresponds with a sound perception of the principles upon which our foreign policy should be founded. But at least it is a factor which can never be ignored by those responsible for framing our policies.'⁽¹⁵⁾

Mr. Chamberlain's views on the rôle and size of the army have been given at some length here for two reasons. First, his influence in the Government was very great and he was shortly to become Prime Minister. His views carried weight not only because of his current office, but also because he was already, in many ways the most influential member of the Cabinet. Second, the views about the army which he put forward in this particular memorandum were, in principle, views which the Cabinet gradually adopted almost in their entirety and which they continued to hold for some months after Munich. Although Mr. Chamberlain denied on this occasion that he was preaching a doctrine of 'limited liability' he was, in practice, doing precisely that.

In his reply to the Chancellor, Mr. Duff Cooper underlined the

* Chamberlain had earlier made this same point in a letter to his sisters, dated 9th February 1936, in which he says that 'As I foresaw, the Defence programme is coming more and more into the foreground. I told S.B. some time ago that it would eat up everything else in this session. I have had to do most of the work on the programme which has been materially modified as a result, and I am pretty satisfied now that if we can keep out of the war for a few years we shall have an air force of such striking power that no-one will care to run risks with it. I cannot believe that the next war, if it ever comes, will be like the last one and I believe our resources will be more profitably employed in the air and on the sea than in building up great armies'. Ministers had not consulted the Chiefs of Staff on this last matter when Chamberlain wrote and he, himself, advanced no arguments for his view.

growing difference of view between those who foresaw circumstances in which Britain might need to repeat, on land, something similar—in principle if not in actual detail—to the effort she had made in the First World War, and those who believed that the effort had, in some ways, been a strategic mistake and one that ought not to be repeated. The Secretary of State agreed that nobody could hope to predict exactly the conditions of the next war. On the other hand he gave it as his view—

‘... that the simplest and the gravest emergency which can be envisaged is an attack by Germany on France and Belgium. It has been the view of successive Chiefs of Staff and Secretaries of State for War that in that eventuality we should be prepared to send a land force to Belgium or France. It may be assumed with some certainty that, rapidly as events moved in August 1914, they will move a great deal more rapidly on the next occasion, and therefore the further our preparations are advanced the better.’

If the view was accepted that Britain should in no circumstances send a land force to take part in a Continental war then the whole national military policy would require immediate and fundamental re-adjustment. If, however, such a land force used in that way was to be envisaged, then so long as that possibility remained all other alternatives had little significance. Further, the sending of an initial expeditionary force, limited in size to the Regular Army, might prove a serious miscalculation unless there were reinforcements to follow. The autumn of 1914, Mr. Duff Cooper argued, had already taught that lesson. Finally, on the production side the Secretary of State argued that not only could the re-equipment of the Regular and Territorial forces proceed simultaneously—although in a very modified form as far as the Territorial Army was concerned—but also that the lack of a decision with regard to the Territorial Army was delaying the equipment of the Regular Forces.⁽¹⁶⁾ No detailed explanation was given for this particular argument.

The Cabinet considered these various memoranda on 16th December 1936,⁽¹⁷⁾ and referred the whole matter to the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee. The terms of reference for this particular enquiry, drawn up jointly by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, reveal how fundamental was the developing discussion on the proper place and function of the Army in the overall plans for national and imperial defence. The Chiefs of Staff were—

‘(a) To consider and report on the rôle of (a) the Regular Army, and (b), the Territorial Army in war with a view to an early decision as to the nature of their equipment and the priority which should be accorded to it in the placing of orders for the

equipment and maintenance of all the Forces of the Crown, having special regard to the following:

- (i) The desirability of planning beforehand what forces of all kinds should be available for active service on the outbreak of the major European war.
- (ii) The nature and quantity of the equipment and reserves (both of material and personnel) required to enable
 - (a) any given land force,
 - (b) any given air striking force, to be available on the outbreak of war and to be maintained in the field.
- (iii) The requirements of home defence and of the defence of overseas ports and garrisons.
- (iv) The time required for the transport of a Field Force of any given size to the Continent, and the time likely to be available for that purpose after the outbreak of war.
- (v) The relative merits as a deterrent of
 - (a) a land force, and
 - (b) an air force,
 to be provided at an equivalent expenditure.
- (b) In so far as it may be contemplated that the Territorial Force would take part in a major European war immediately on the outbreak of war—to consider and report what type of equipment the force would require at the outset, and how far the force could be trained in the effective use of that equipment in peacetime.¹⁽¹⁸⁾

The Chiefs of Staff, in their report, took the general rôle of the British Army, as defined in the 1936 Statement Relating to Defence, as their starting point. In any consideration of the rôle of the British Army in war it was necessary to bear in mind the normal peace-time duties of the Regular Army in connection with general Imperial defence namely, the provision of garrisons at defended ports and in many other parts of the Empire. These garrisons, as constituted at the beginning of 1937 were, it was agreed, of the minimum strength compatible with their function, and depended in large measure for their efficiency as preservers of the peace on the certainty that they could be immediately reinforced in an emergency; and the only reserves available for such reinforcement were those units of the Regular Army which happened to be stationed in Britain at any given time. These units existed primarily for the purpose of training and supplying the drafts necessary to maintain garrisons overseas and their number was mainly determined, under the Cardwell system, by the number of corresponding units which it was necessary to maintain abroad in peace. In fact, the strength of the Regular Army was not, and never had been, related in any way to the extent

of Britain's possible liabilities. At the same time this home force, as the only regular reserve, was organised into brigades and divisions which could, if the situation at home permitted, be sent overseas either as reinforcements or as a striking force. The strength of this striking force, as accepted at that time by the Cabinet, was four divisions and one mobile division.*

In the execution of its normal duties as just described—and leaving aside for the moment the question of its employment in a European war—the Regular Army might be required to carry out operations in the Far East, on the North West frontier of India, or in the Middle East, against such first-class military powers as Japan, Russia or Italy. For operations of this character, the Chiefs of Staff claimed, the best modern equipment was necessary. Nor could there be any question of restricting the provision of this equipment to certain selected units, because the system demanded the constant interchange of all units comprising the Regular Army. In other words, the whole of the Regular Army should be modernised and the Chiefs of Staff emphasised this point because they had been given to understand that the financial interpretation given to the third D.R.C. Report limited the sanction for modernisation to such units as happened to be in the force held ready at home for despatch overseas when required.†

The Chiefs of Staff next turned to consider the situation specifically envisaged in their terms of reference, namely a major European war. They assumed that in such a war the most probable belligerents would be France, Belgium and Great Britain on the one side, and

Table 13
Distribution of the Army at Home and Overseas at the End of 1937

* The figures ⁽¹⁹⁾ for the distribution of the Army at home and overseas at the end of 1937—closely comparable with those for the beginning of the year—were as follows: ⁽²⁰⁾

| Theatre | Total of all ranks | Number of Battalions |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| India | 53,951 | 45 |
| Burma | 1,547 | 2 |
| Far East | 12,143 | 8 |
| Middle East | 16,996 | 14 |
| Mediterranean | 4,191 | 4 |
| Various | 1,806 | 1 |
| Home (including Ireland) | 106,704 | 64 |
| Total | 197,338 | 138 |

† See above, p. 262.

Germany on the other. Germany would aim for a quick knock-out blow and her initial main effort would probably be concentrated either against France or against Britain. If the main effort was directed against Britain, then clearly all the nation's resources must be used defensively to defeat it. After that the country should be prepared to adopt a more offensive rôle in order to exploit defensive success. If, on the other hand, the enemy's main effort were to be directed against France, then Britain should be prepared to render all assistance in her power to that country and its Continental allies in the first stages of the war.

The Chiefs of Staff report then went on:

'This brings us to the question of the form that our assistance should take. As to this, it is not possible, in the absence of experience of a war between first-class air Powers, to say whether or no air forces can stop armies. Much would, of course, depend on circumstances, such as the degree of concentration of the armies, the vulnerability of their lines of communication, and the relative preponderance of the respective air forces. However this may be, we are agreed that the Allies must be capable of placing in the field considerable land forces if they are to stop a German onslaught on land.

We have heard it suggested that these land forces should all be provided by our Allies, and that our contribution should be limited to the air and sea. However strong may be the arguments in favour of such a course from our own standpoint, we must have regard to the reactions that it would cause upon our Allies. We are, for instance, credibly informed that the French would be prepared to support the Belgians with eight infantry divisions and one mobile division, on condition that a British Field Force were despatched to the Continent; and though it is undesirable that we should accept such a commitment in advance, circumstances at the time might well demand that we should do so. Moreover, it is probable that the French would press us strongly to take some share in the war on land.

We cannot, therefore, discount the possibility that we may be compelled to despatch land forces to the Continent at some stage in a war, and perhaps at the earliest possible moment, and we consider that we must lay our plans accordingly. Since, as we have already said, a Field Force supported by the Territorial Army is essential for purposes of Imperial Defence, we can see no overriding reason why these forces should not be held equally available for a war on the Continent in case of need. At the same time, we think it right to say that we should greatly deprecate the development of such a land campaign, so far as this country is concerned, on the scale experienced in 1914-18 with large national armies. It is, of course, impossible to dogmatise on such a matter in advance, but we think that our effort on land, so far

as peace preparations are concerned, should be strictly limited to the Regular Field Force supported by the Territorial Army.

To sum up, we cannot foresee the circumstances in which war may break out in Europe, and the decision as to the rôle of our Army may well remain in doubt until the last moment. But though we are averse to any commitment, we do not think it possible to assume that in no circumstances and at no stage of the war will it be necessary to send a military force to the Continent.'

In amplification of this very moderate statement of their views on national strategy, the Chiefs of Staff then went on to discuss the size and equipment of the land forces which, in such circumstances as they had envisaged, would be available for despatch. In the first place, and assuming that few of the Regular forces serving at home would be needed as reinforcements for overseas garrisons, four divisions and one mobile division would be available. Once those divisions had been despatched to the Continent there would be no Regular reserve available for Imperial defence liabilities. Moreover, it would not be possible to leave the Regular Army on the Continent unsupported by subsequent reinforcements. Hence, there must be a reserve of some kind. And under present arrangements that reserve consisted of the twelve divisions of the Territorial Army.

Given the great anxiety of tasks which the Territorial Army might be asked to undertake, it was difficult to fix its strength on an entirely logical basis; possible commitments could not be exactly forecast especially in view of the uncertainties of international politics. The Chiefs of Staff, however, saw no reason to recommend changes in the structure, size and organisation of the Territorial Army, which as at present organised provided on paper for the equivalent of two divisions for anti-aircraft troops and twelve divisions more. Further, they were of the opinion that, even should there be a need to make further conversions to anti-aircraft troops, that should not be allowed to diminish the total of twelve divisions for other purposes. In fact the peace-time strength of the Territorial Army was very low, and large numbers of men would be needed, on embodiment, to bring it up to war strength. Moreover, training in peace-time was bound to be limited and at least four months intensive training would be necessary to make the Territorial force fit for service abroad; in other words, no part of it could take part in a European war immediately on the outbreak of hostilities.

So far as equipment was concerned, if the Territorial Army was to act as a reserve for the Regular Army then, like the latter, it might be required to operate anywhere in the world. It should, therefore, be provided with modern equipment of the same type as the corresponding units of the Regular Army. Even if, because of industrial limita-

tions, it was not possible to equip the Territorial Army on any considerable scale in the short-term, nevertheless whatever was available must be evenly distributed throughout the twelve divisions. Further, what was needed was a broadening of the present basis of production which would enable the Territorial Army generally to be equipped to a certain degree, and which would also accelerate the completion of its equipment after the outbreak of war. Since totalitarian governments exercised such a high degree of control over the industrial activities of their countries even in peace-time, then the time factor in modern war had become more vital than ever before. Hence the need for measures which would enable the Territorial Army to be ready for service at the earliest possible moment after the outbreak of war. 'It is imperative', commented the Chiefs of Staff, 'that our forces should be maintained in the highest state of readiness that our resources permit. The first essential for us is to survive the opening stages. The earlier that all our forces can intervene the greater their value, and the knowledge of this fact in foreign countries might have considerable value as a deterrent'.

The priority to be accorded to the provision of modern equipment for the Army, both Regular and Territorial, it was admitted, must be determined in relation to the needs of the other two Services. The Chiefs of Staff assumed that naval and air forces would almost certainly be the first to be engaged in operations against the enemy and, in some circumstances, the Army might have to concentrate its energies on the tasks of internal security and home defence. But since it was impossible to be sure that the Army would not have to be despatched to the Continent, for example in circumstances in which Germany concentrated her attack upon France, then the Government's aim should be to ensure that the Army was brought to the maximum state of readiness that could be attained without prejudice to the naval and air programmes. If the Regular Army had to be despatched to the Continent it should not be exposed to the risk of operations without a properly equipped pool of reinforcements which could support it in case of need. The aim should be 'to provide the Territorial Army with such equipment as would enable it to be ready four months after the outbreak of war, when the training of its personnel might be sufficiently advanced'.

In dealing with the transport of the Field Force to the Continent, the Chiefs of Staff gave warning that it could not be guaranteed that a British Field Force could be deployed in Belgium in time to assist in preventing the German allies from overrunning that country. Time would be on the side of a totalitarian Germany able to make a surprise move. On the other hand plans were being prepared which would, if the situation at home permitted, enable the mobile division to be landed by Z+7 days and the four infantry divisions by Z+15

days. These timings, however, depended on certain acceleration measures (the cost of which was under discussion) and also on the provision of the necessary shipping.*

Finally, the Chiefs of Staff turned to the other major problem which they had been asked to report on, viz. the relative merits of a land force and an air force to be provided at an equivalent expenditure. Their views were neither precise, nor particularly helpful; the problem postulated was one more likely to be set by a politician than by a soldier, and the answer to it depended upon far too many other factors for this particular one of expenditure to have much value on its own. The Chiefs of Staff repeated, what they had more than once emphasised in the past, that wars were conducted in all three elements—sea, land and air—and that it was impossible to restrict operations to any one of these elements. All three Services had their own rôles which they must be prepared to fulfil in co-operation with each other. Air Forces were an ‘incomparable offensive agency’. But their effect had yet to be proved. Further, it was likely that the effectiveness of air attack would decrease as successful defensive measures, both active and passive, were built up to meet it. And Germany had already pointed the way in this matter.⁽²²⁾

It would be easy to criticise this report on the ground that it was traditional, and traditional in the sense that such reports represented a compromise wherein the particular interests of no one Service suffered as a result of a genuine attempt to reassess the basis of national and imperial defence as a whole.† But as against that, it should be remembered that the views of the Chiefs of Staff on this occasion were, in all essentials, those in which they had been confirmed by the experience of their common investigations together with leading officials—Hankey, Warren Fisher and Vansittart—over the past three to four years. Both major reports of the D.R.C. had recommended a balanced programme of deficiency and then

* It is clear, from later evidence, that the only way to achieve these timings was by the provision of special ships for Army needs, something which the Army Command felt it useless to ask for.⁽²¹⁾

† Commenting on this episode in a letter to his sisters dated 6th February 1937, Chamberlain wrote: ‘I have at last got a decision about the Army and it practically gives me all I want. The Regular Army is to be armed “cap à pie” with the most modern equipment, and is to be ready to go anywhere at any time. But we are not committed to sending it anywhere any when. The Territorials are to have similar equipment but only in sufficient quantity to enable them to train. In practice this means that by withdrawing that equipment from all but two Divisions and concentrating it on them, they could be ready if wanted to go out and reinforce the Regulars in four months after the outbreak of war. The War Office have renounced all idea of a Continental Army on the scale of 1914-18 and have with a certain amount of grumbling accepted the above. The amusing thing is that the 3 Chiefs of Staff acting together reported in favour of having 12 Territorial Divisions ready in 4 months but after the Cabinet had taken its decision I heard from the First Lord and the S/S Air, independently, that *their* Chief of Staff really agreed with my view. Of course I always felt that when it came to the point dog would eat dog . . .’

rearmament planning for all three Services at the same time. Both reports had recommended that national defence planning should envisage a Continental commitment, and that participation in such a commitment should be one of the responsibilities of the Army together with its other major responsibilities for Home and Imperial Defence. Changes of emphasis in balanced programmes of this kind had been introduced not by officials but by Ministers; and it was mainly from Ministers that other similar changes of emphasis emanated during the next two years. A balanced rearmament programme for all three Services did not, in fact, become ministerial policy until 1939.

In his comments on this report the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence accepted the general premise of the Chiefs of Staff that the Territorial Army should be trained and equipped to provide a reserve from which units in support of the Regular Army might be sent overseas in an emergency. 'I am sure,' he wrote, 'that Parliament and the Country expect the Territorial Force to be treated as an integral part of our forces available for service in a major European war and to be equipped sufficiently to enable it to play its part'. Since all were agreed that the Territorials could be trained, in peace-time, only 'to a limited extent', all that remained was to lay down some standard to which supply plans might conform. His recommendation was that the Territorials should receive, in peace-time, modern equipment spread evenly over the whole force, and that the amount of equipment to be so supplied should be enough 'in the event of an emergency . . . to equip fully one or more divisions (according to the stage which the programme had reached) by drawing upon the equipment of the force as a whole. In this way . . . one or more divisions could be sent out in reinforcement of the Regular Army after not more than four months from the outbreak of war', while the supply capacity already planned would be brought into production and a series of reinforcements become available up to the total manpower strength of the Territorial Force.⁽²³⁾

At its discussion of these papers the Cabinet accepted the Minister's suggestions. The Secretary of State for War was then instructed to draw up estimates of cost for the full modernisation and equipment of the Regular Army and two anti-aircraft divisions of the Territorial Force, with similar training equipment for the other twelve Territorial divisions on the Minister's suggested standard.⁽²⁴⁾

It will be noted that what the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence suggested, and what was approved by the Cabinet, was in fact a serious modification of the programme which officials, both civil and military, and the Secretary of State for War had been asking for. The latter had thought of at least four Territorial divisions reinforcing an expeditionary force four months after the outbreak of

war. The Minister spoke in terms of one or more such divisions. This difference of approach became clear when the Secretary of State for War submitted his estimates of cost to the Cabinet.

The Secretary of State estimated that the Regular Army and two anti-aircraft divisions of the Territorial Army could be provided with the most complete and efficient equipment, together with the necessary war reserves for a sum of nearly £208 million, the bulk of the programme to be completed by April 1940. The cost of providing the remainder of the Territorial Army with sufficient equipment of the same type as that of the Regular Army to enable the whole twelve divisions to be trained in peace was put at about £9,250,000, the bulk of the programme, again, to be completed by April 1940. But, so far as the reinforcement of the Regular Army in the field was concerned, this programme was from the point of view of the War Office unsatisfactory because militarily incomplete. First, the Army view, as we have seen, was that not only should the Regular Army in the field be reinforced by the Territorial Army by, at the latest, four months after the outbreak of fighting, but also that the minimum effective reinforcement would comprise four divisions with the appropriate proportion of Corps Troops. Second, that the other eight Territorial Army divisions should be able to take the field by the end of the seventh month after the outbreak of war. Finally, these two military requirements could not be met unless there was some provision, in peace-time, of part of the war equipment and reserves for all those divisions (i.e. of those items which would take the longest time to manufacture) and also the creation, in peace-time, of the industrial capacity needed to complete their equipment and maintain them in the field once war had begun. Mr. Duff Cooper claimed that it was 'axiomatic that a formation cannot take the field until it is provided with its full scale of war equipment and sufficient measures of equipment to maintain it, at the estimated rates of wastage, during the period that must elapse until it can be maintained by post-mobilisation manufacture'. This condition implied both that a considerable part of war equipment for the Territorial Army should be held in peace, and that a shadow manufacturing capacity to supplement such equipment should also be provided before the outbreak of war. The manufacturing capacity currently being created was, he claimed:

'... based only on the deficiency programme for the Regular Army and the Air Defence of Great Britain.

The reserves which it is proposed to hold in peace for the Regular Field Force are those which, it is estimated, are required for its maintenance until that manufacturing capacity, increased as necessary, can maintain it in the field. Moreover, the manufacturing capacity at present envisaged cannot be counted upon

generally to do more than that; it cannot be regarded as being sufficient in war for equipping or maintaining the Territorial Army.'

Mr. Duff Cooper therefore asked the Cabinet to give its consideration and acceptance to two additional proposals. First, that full war equipment and reserves should be provided for a Territorial Army contingent of four divisions, and the appropriate proportion of Corps Troops, at an estimated capital cost of about £43,500,000, and that preparation should be made forthwith for providing as much as possible of this equipment by 1st April 1941. Second, 'that in order to facilitate the correlation of the industrial resources of the country with the requirements of the three Services, investigations should now be put in hand with a view to determining the further industrial capacity required for maintaining in the field the remaining eight divisions of the Territorial Army, and for providing such of their equipment as could be manufactured after the outbreak of war, on the assumption that they would proceed overseas during the sixth and seventh months after the outbreak of war'.⁽²⁵⁾

When Mr. Duff Cooper's estimates were discussed by the Cabinet there was no problem about the major items comprising the £208 million to be spent on the Regular Army and two anti-aircraft divisions, or about the £9,250,000 for training equipment for the rest of the Territorial Army. Trouble did arise, however, over Mr. Duff Cooper's additional proposals. Mr. Chamberlain argued that these could not be regarded as purely military matters. The country was being asked to maintain a larger Navy than for many years; a great Air Force, which was a new arm altogether; in addition an Army for use on the Continent and, finally, facilities for producing munitions which would be required not only for our own forces but also for our Allies.* He did not believe that the Government could, or ought, or, in the event would be allowed by the country to enter a Continental war with the intention of fighting on the same lines as in the last war. The Government should therefore make up their minds to something different. Britain's contribution by land should be on a limited scale. It was wrong to assume that the next war would be fought by her alone against Germany. If Britain had to fight, she would have allies, allies who must in any event maintain large armies. He did not accept that Britain must also plan for a large army. His suggestion, therefore, was that the Cabinet should approve the major proposals of the Secretary of State for War concerning the Regular Army, the

* The significance of this particular point was not made clear. In these discussions 'Allies' normally meant France and Belgium.

anti-aircraft forces and also the Territorial Army training programme, and then proceed, in comparative leisure, to a consideration of the proper rôle of the Army in the long-term in the light of other considerations. In answer to this, the Secretary of State for War reminded the Cabinet that the rôle of the Army had already been under consideration for many months past. If the consistent advice of the Chiefs of Staff was now to be ignored then, in fact, the problem of the rôle of the Army would be back again in the melting pot and he might have to instruct the General Staff to alter all their plans.

In the end the Cabinet followed the line taken by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The expenditure of £208 million plus £9,250,000 was approved. The other proposals of the Secretary of State for War were, at any rate for the time being, shelved. Instead the Cabinet referred the whole question of the rôle of the Army, and its possible further organisation, armament and equipment to the D.P.(P) which was already considering the proposed New Standard of naval strength.⁽²⁶⁾* Terms of reference to the Committee were, by instructions from the Cabinet, drawn up by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. The Committee was asked:

'In the light of the strategical, national, financial, political and manpower aspects involved, to consider:

- (i) The part which the Army, including the Territorial Army, should on the outbreak of a major war be prepared to take, regard being had to the offensive and defensive potentialities of the Navy and Air Force, and of the Forces of possible allies, and any other factors involved.
- (ii) The armament and equipment which should be provided for it, over and above what has already been approved, and the time limits within which it should be furnished.'⁽²⁷⁾

Thus matters stood when Mr. Chamberlain succeeded Mr. Baldwin as Prime Minister in May 1937. From then onwards, for the next twelve months, the whole problem of the rôle, size, organisation and cost of the Army became involved in the comprehensive review of defence expenditure carried out by the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon.[†]

Writing after the war Mr. Duff Cooper modestly declared that he had acquired little credit during his tenure at the War Office.⁽²⁸⁾ Certainly he had gained little credit with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In a letter to his sisters at the end of May 1937, soon after

* See above, Chapter IX, Section 3.

† See above, Chapter VIII, Section 1.

he had moved to 10 Downing Street, Mr. Chamberlain said that he had been anxious to move Duff Cooper from the War Office (the latter had now become First Lord of the Admiralty) because he had been a failure in his old job. 'I am convinced', wrote Chamberlain, 'that many and drastic changes have got to be made (i.e. at the War Office) which will require great application and much courage to carry out. D.C. has been lazy and until lately has shown no sign of getting down to work on any of the big problems. But on the important subject of the rôle of the Army he and I have had repeated differences and he has handled his case in the Cabinet clumsily and with little power of adaptation.' Chamberlain may have been right about Duff Cooper's laziness—a quality which Chamberlain himself certainly did not share. But 'repeated differences' had arisen largely because Duff Cooper had prepared and argued a case energetically, even if late in the day. And, while it is true that he had failed to persuade his colleagues of the correctness of his views, the official records suggest not that he put his case clumsily, but simply that his views were unpopular. Mr. Chamberlain's views carried great weight and, in many ways, properly so. But his arguments were accepted not only because of his advocacy but also because they were what Ministers wanted to hear.

In some respects Mr. Duff Cooper was not far wrong about himself. As Secretary of State for War his achievements were small, and certainly aroused much less attention than did those of his successor. The tide of finance and of strategic thinking was moving against him. But whatever else he had failed to do he had argued a case for a comprehensive plan for the Regular and Territorial Armies in that kind of war which he thought was becoming more and more likely. Above all, he wanted a firm policy for the Army, no less than did Chamberlain. And he made this clear at the very time when, in terms of his own views and objectives, he had failed. He wrote to Chamberlain on 4th May 1937, shortly before the change of government, arguing that the important thing was to reach a definite decision about long-term policy for the Army as soon as possible. He said that he was prepared to re-examine his own proposals if financial considerations made them impossible to accept, and to think up another policy for the Army if his present one was not good enough. But there must be a steady policy of some kind. 'Should the blow fall before we are ready', he wrote, 'we may be forgiven if we can show that we spared no pains to make ourselves ready—but if it appears that we had not even decided upon the objective at which we were aiming we shall not be forgiven.'⁽²⁹⁾ What is surprising in so intelligent a man is that Duff Cooper apparently failed to understand that Chamberlain already had clear objectives and had long been steadily progressing towards them. The new enquiry into the rôle

of the Army, a move which Duff Cooper regarded as delaying tactics was, in fact, Chamberlain's next step towards getting his own way.⁽³⁰⁾

2. *The Army and the Air Defence of Great Britain, 1936-38*

In considering the effect upon the Army of developments in overall plans for national and imperial defence the increasing attention paid to air defence is of the first importance.

During the First World War the Army had undertaken responsibility for the operation of searchlights and anti-aircraft guns and had kept that responsibility even when the Royal Flying Corps developed into a separate Service—the Royal Air Force. When the Royal Air Force was finally given responsibility for the air defence of Britain in 1922-23 the issue of anti-aircraft defences came up also for consideration at the same time. At this point it was decided that the War Office would continue to provide and man guns and searchlights while the Air Ministry provided fighter defence. But the whole organisation for active air defence was to come under Air Ministry control, operational command was to be exercised by an air officer, while the War Office was to consult the Air Ministry both on the general principles of such defence and on the 'primary disposition' of the guns and searchlights for which it remained responsible.⁽³¹⁾

The size of the War Office commitment was defined by the Romer Committee in 1924 in relation to the fighter element of the Royal Air Force 52 Squadron expansion plan. There was to be a new command called Air Defence of Great Britain, and included in this would be 192 guns in eight regiments and 504 searchlights. The formation of the Territorial air defence brigades had already been announced in 1922. But recruiting was slow. By 1928, for example, although the ground units for the 'inner zone' were theoretically established, their manpower for guns and searchlights was less than half strength. Elsewhere things were worse.

Anti-aircraft defence shared in the increase of attention and expenditure as the pace of rearmament began to gather speed in the mid-nineteen-thirties. Earlier plans had been based on the expectation of air attack from the south and south-east—from France. London, the Thames Estuary and the Channel Ports had, consequently, been the primary areas of concern. Now, with the emergence of Germany as the most likely enemy, the threat of attacks from the east assumed much greater importance; and the provision of anti-aircraft defence for the Midlands and the North became a matter of urgency in circumstances in which Germany might either infringe the neutrality of the Low Countries by flying over them, or

even occupy airfields in Belgium and Holland in the early stages of a campaign. Two major enquiries into the system of the air defence of Great Britain were therefore undertaken by the C.I.D. The first Committee sat under the chairmanship of Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, and reported in the spring of 1935.⁽³²⁾ The chairman of the second committee was Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, and he presented his report in February 1937.^{(33)*} The detailed proposals of both reports were based on the twin arguments that, in face of the increased danger of air attacks, defences should be thickened and also extended. The first report, proposing that defences be extended as far north as the Tees, estimated the need at 57 anti-aircraft batteries and 90 searchlight companies, a total of 43,500 men with equipment at a capital cost of £7,750,000.⁽³⁴⁾ This scheme was not accepted in full by the Government.⁽³⁵⁾ Indeed, as far as the manpower item was concerned it was difficult to see how the Territorial Army, in 1935 about 35,000 men below its establishment strength of 165,000, could possibly supply enough men for this ambitious defence plan unless recruiting increased and then, probably, only at the price of giving the Army a higher order of priority in national defence plans as a whole. In a memorandum on the report the Chiefs of Staff pointed out these manpower difficulties quite clearly. The War Office, they stated, was now prepared to convert two Territorial divisions, out of an established strength of fourteen, entirely to anti-aircraft defence, thus giving up some 18,000 men previously available for reinforcement contingents for the Field Force and other purposes. The War Office could not go beyond this without denuding later contingents for those same purposes. It was true that, in peace-time, units up to approximately 75 per cent of war strength would normally be accepted, the remaining 25 per cent being unskilled personnel who could be enlisted on the outbreak of war. Nevertheless, under existing conditions it was by no means certain that the Territorial Army could find by ordinary recruitment the men required to complete the country's defensive system. The present strength of anti-aircraft units was only 41 per cent of their peace establishments, and the Chiefs of Staff concluded that the Government would have to undertake a national campaign to secure the necessary additional recruits for the Territorial Army.⁽³⁶⁾

But still the threat increased. Early in October 1936 the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had informal conversations with Service Ministers and with the Chiefs of Staff on the subject of anti-aircraft defence,⁽³⁷⁾ discussions which took place expressly because of the ever-increasing potential scale of German air attack.

* See below, pp. 462-63.

At the meeting it was agreed that the basic assumption governing the plans for anti-aircraft defence in the event of war with Germany should be 'that Germany may attempt a knock-out blow from the air and that the blow would be delivered with the maximum of intensity at the moment of the declaration of war'. Sir Thomas Inskip argued that the existing arrangements for fighter defence and for anti-aircraft guns and searchlights required reconsideration; he doubted whether provision already approved for the defence of particular localities was on an adequate scale.⁽³⁸⁾ Shortly before this, at the end of July, the C.I.D. had already decided that Coventry, Bristol and Derby should be provided with anti-aircraft defences at the expense of the London Docks area, Plymouth and Manchester. The Minister now claimed that the reconnaissance of vital areas currently being undertaken in connection with Air Raid Precautions would 'undoubtedly reveal other points requiring protection' and that, before long, the area of the country likely to be subject to air attack would be still further extended because of the increasing range of aircraft. In these circumstances, he argued, the—

'... Committee of the Anti-Aircraft Defence of Great Britain should review the approved schemes for Anti-Aircraft Defence, including the provision of fighter aircraft, and the plans for the anti-aircraft defences of ports, and make recommendations as soon as possible as to the "ideal" defence they consider desirable, irrespective of considerations of cost.'⁽³⁹⁾

The C.I.D., on 29th October 1936, discussed the Minister's memorandum at length and fully approved his recommendations.⁽⁴⁰⁾ As a result, during the winter months of 1936-37 the committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Hugh Dowding, already referred to, carried out its enquiries and reported in February 1937 on what it considered necessary for the 'ideal' air defence of Great Britain.⁽⁴¹⁾ The report was then considered at length at a full meeting of the C.I.D. presided over by the new Prime Minister, Mr. Chamberlain, on 17th June 1937.

The full details of the scheme are not relevant here. In any case, some of them which concern the fighter strength of the Royal Air Force will be considered in a later chapter. What are relevant here are the recommendations of Sir Hugh Dowding's committee on anti-aircraft gun and searchlight defences, since these items were now rising steadily up the list of Army priorities. The existing scheme of defence ran from Portsmouth to the Tees but, because of the increased range of aircraft, it was now recommended that the scheme should be extended to include Edinburgh and Glasgow. There were further recommendations designed to fill in existing gaps and to add

strength to the defences where it was considered that attack might be heaviest. In total, the 'ideal' measures recommended were to provide 158 A/A batteries instead of 76 as at present planned, and 196 searchlight companies instead of the present 108.* Commenting on these proposals the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Cyril Deverell, pointed out that, if they were accepted in full, they would raise very serious problems for the War Office in both personnel and accommodation. In fact, he estimated that 50,000 more men would be required if the proposals of the 'ideal' scheme were to be fully implemented.⁽⁴²⁾

The C.I.D. decided that the 'ideal' scheme was by no means an over-insurance, that action on it was desirable in principle, and that the implications in manpower, material and money should be investigated forthwith.⁽⁴³⁾ These investigations were reported on by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence in July 1937.⁽⁴⁴⁾ His immediate reports did not deal with the 'ideal' scheme as a whole, but only with that part of it which was concerned with the northward extension of defences to cover the Forth and Clyde. For this it was estimated that the Territorial Army would need to provide four anti-aircraft batteries and twenty searchlight companies, a total of 8,000 men at an initial cost of nearly £3 million and an annual recurrent cost of about £250,000. The Minister's estimates were then considered by the C.I.D. on 15th July.⁽⁴⁵⁾ At that meeting the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, agreed to the formation of a new Group Headquarters at Catterick, and admitted in principle that some kind of air defence must eventually be provided for northern areas; but he refused approval for other specific recommendations in view of the recent Cabinet decision (taken on 30th June) that no further substantial spending on defence measures should be incurred until the whole field of rising defence expenditure had been reviewed in detail.

There were difficulties in manpower as well as money. While of the opinion that the Territorial Army could provide adequate standards of technical efficiency and readiness for action provided enough recruits could be found for guns and searchlights, the C.I.G.S. pointed out that both the Regular Army and the Territorial Army were short of men. The Regular Army itself already had two anti-aircraft groups provided for its own protection and also as a mobile reserve for the air defence of Great Britain to the extent to which, and for the time during which, any part of these groups might be stationed at home. The groups were composed of Royal Artillery and Royal Engineer personnel as also were anti-aircraft units abroad. Coast defences abroad were also, in general, similarly

* The provisions in the Brooke-Popham proposals, see also above, p. 461, had been increased since 1935.

manned. As a result, the proportion of R.A. and R.E. personnel so employed amounted, in approved establishments, to over 25 per cent and over 33 per cent of those two Corps respectively. It would clearly be impossible to provide, in addition, for any increase in metropolitan air defence from this same source unless the Regular Army itself were to be increased in size.^{(46)*}

The Territorial Army presented no easier problem. On 1st January 1936 the War Office had formed the first anti-aircraft division of the Territorial Army, a division whose strength was still only about 7,700 men by the end of that year. A second similar division was formed later in 1936; and the strength of that division was still under 7,000 by the following December.⁽⁴⁷⁾ In 1937, it is true, recruiting began to improve. Indeed, Mr. Hore-Belisha regarded this as one of his principal tasks on going to the War Office; and when the manpower implications of the 'ideal' scheme were being investigated, that same summer, he was optimistic—up to a point. The extension of guns and searchlight defences to the Forth and the Clyde demanded about 8,000 men. Recruiting at the time was good in both the Lowlands and Northumbria; and it was then thought that the men required could be provided either by raising new units or, if necessary, by converting units of the Field Army contingents of the Territorial Army.⁽⁴⁸⁾ By the beginning of 1938, however, Mr. Hore-Belisha had somewhat changed his tune. In a lengthy review of the organisation of the Army for its rôle in war (a review which will be referred to again later) he pointed out the two Territorial divisions at present employed in the air defence of Great Britain were about 20,000 short of their establishment strength of 48,000 men. Under the full 'ideal' scheme, two more Territorial air defence divisions, another 45,000 men, would be needed. These divisions would have to be formed partly by conversion of existing units and partly by raising new ones. The latter course would be inevitable in some cases, since the possibility of conversion depended on whether the requisite units were both concentrated and suitably situated. Finally, if the 'ideal' scheme were eventually approved in full, only 10 instead of 12 Territorial divisions would remain available for other purposes. The Minister went on:

'To proceed, unless the Cabinet in their review of priorities so desire, with further stages of the "Ideal" scheme at the present time would be at the undue expense of other items of the rearmament programme, for which but a limited industrial capacity is available. Indeed, the present approved programme of A.D.G.B. is already delaying rearmament in other directions.'⁽⁴⁹⁾

* At the beginning of 1938 half one group was on its way to Egypt.

3. *Limited Liability: No Major Continental Commitment, 1937-38*

Let us now return to the main theme, that of the progress of rearmament throughout the Army as a whole from the summer of 1937, though that story will inevitably bring us back to some further consideration of the Army's part in the air defence of Great Britain. The new Secretary of State for War, Mr. Hore-Belisha, spent his first months in office dealing principally with two internal Army problems—the improvement of recruiting for both the Regular and the Territorial forces, and a series of changes among senior officers, both in the Army Council and in Commands at home and abroad.⁽⁵⁰⁾ In July 1937 he took up again the issue of new equipment and war reserves for four divisions of the Territorial Army at an estimated cost of over £43 million. In a short paper prepared for the D.P.(P) he argued the case moderately. He admitted that suggestions for further expenditure, over and above what had already been approved, might have to be determined not by what should but by what could be provided, having due regard to the requirements of the other Services and the policy of avoiding interference with normal industry. He also agreed that, within these limits, it would be extremely difficult to spend more than the sums already approved—about £214 million in all—during the next two years. On the other hand he claimed that the War Office would be the better able to obtain quotations on the basis of continuous production if it could now proceed on the assumption of providing for the new equipment and reserves for four Territorial divisions by 1940-41 or as soon as the main programme permitted.⁽⁵¹⁾ The request was turned down. And, as Hore-Belisha himself recorded, it was then that the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, was 'quite firm that at present there should be no increase in the cost of the Army's programme.'⁽⁵²⁾

From the Chancellor's point of view this was a perfectly proper decision—he had inherited from his predecessor, now the Prime Minister, an enquiry into the cost of the Service programmes as a whole. Piecemeal changes, whether in actual plans or in costing, were sending the Service estimates up steadily and were taking place without the overall financial framework which the Treasury considered essential if rearmament was to be carried out without financial chaos. Whatever the merits or demerits of the Treasury case, the enquiry had been agreed to by the Cabinet as a whole;* and Mr. Hore-Belisha was therefore presenting his case for what was a further piecemeal decision at a time when, with a general review of Service expenditure in train, he could least expect encouragement.

* On 30th June 1937. See above, p. 279 and ff.

The Service Departments in fact submitted their forecasts of the cost of programmes over the next five years in August 1937. In October the Chancellor of the Exchequer reproduced these figures for the Cabinet together with his comments on them from a purely financial point of view.⁽⁵³⁾* In December, as we will see again later, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence analysed the same figures and the Chancellor's comments side by side, and outlined his own views both upon the financial aspects of rearmament and upon the shape and size of the Service programmes which, as he saw it, the country needed and could afford. The total War Office estimate which had been submitted as part of this process was framed on the basis of existing authorised policy. Thus it included provision for re-equipment and war reserves for the Regular contingent of the Field Force, i.e. for four divisions and one mobile division. It also included the provision of sufficient equipment to enable the Territorial Army to be trained in the same weapons as the Regular Army. It excluded, however, any estimate of war equipment and reserves for the first reinforcement to be provided by the Territorial Army, earlier put at a total of over £43 million, and also the War Office share of implementing the 'ideal' scheme of air defence, a sum of £15 million. Indeed, the Secretary of State for War reckoned that the approximate cost of items not included in his estimate would amount to about £100 million over and above the figure of £467,500,000 for the items already included for the five financial years 1937-41.⁽⁵⁴⁾

In the meantime, and before Sir Thomas Inskip had analysed the forecasts of expenditure for all three Services and their implications, there was an important decision in connection with one particular Army commitment. On 8th November 1937 the Prime Minister presided over a small meeting to consider the whole situation in regard to the supply of material for anti-aircraft defence. It should be remembered that, back in July of that year, in a paper prepared for the C.I.D., Inskip had examined the problem of providing the equipment to implement the 'ideal' scheme of air defence, and his views then had been fairly optimistic. He said that he did not 'anticipate any substantial difficulties' in the process, although he did say that, if new units were raised for the defence of the Forth and the Clyde, that would have to be done at the expense of delay to the completion of peace-time equipment for the existing two anti-aircraft divisions. It was also then his estimate that new units could be completely equipped with modern weapons from 1940 onwards, according to the degree of priority given.⁽⁵⁵⁾ At the meeting of 8th November, however, it would appear that the Minister's

* See above, p. 282.

colleagues did not entirely share his optimism and were anxious to make it clear beyond any doubt which types of material and equipment were to be provided first. Exactly what was said on that occasion is impossible to know, since this was an *ad hoc* meeting of a few Ministers, not a full Cabinet, and no minutes of the discussion appear to have been kept. But the recorded decision of the meeting was:

'That the Secretary of State for War should be authorised to instruct the War Office that the provision of anti-aircraft defences is to have absolute priority over all other forms of war material.'

In addition, Sir Thomas Inskip was instructed to prepare a plan for expediting the present programme for the provision of anti-aircraft armament, and to do so as soon as possible.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The implications of this decision for the total expenditure on the Army were soon to be developed a stage further.

On 22nd December the Cabinet considered the proposals of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence for the defence programmes as a whole, including those for the Army, in the light of the financial investigation of the past six months.^{(57)*} His investigation, the Minister said, had led him to the conclusion that it was necessary to review the whole range of the defence programmes in order to determine which items had the first claim to early completion and which items must, if necessary, be excluded or at least postponed.

'One of the main features,' the Minister wrote, 'which distinguishes our defence problems from those of certain Continental countries, is that we require not only to maintain in peace garrisons and defences at naval bases and other strategic points throughout the world, but also to have available at all times forces for despatch overseas for the performance of what may be described as Imperial Police duties. It is obvious that in time of war the demands for reinforcements of our peace-time Imperial garrisons might well be very considerable. At the same time, the strength of the forces available for such reinforcement is not a matter of such vital importance as the defence of this country, since so long as this country remains undefeated we may hope in time to repair any losses or defeats suffered elsewhere.'

The last objective of national defence policy and the one which could be provided for only after other responsibilities had been met, was 'co-operation in the defence of the territories of any allies we may have in war'.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Translated into practical, detailed terms, this meant that 'in accordance with the principle that the greatest danger

* See above, pp. 282-89.

against which we have to provide protection is attack from the air, the Army should give first priority to the provision of anti-aircraft defences'. Such a decision on priorities had already been suggested, as we have just seen, by Ministers sitting under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, on 8th November. But that decision applied only to the acceleration of currently authorised programmes and, in particular, to the provision of material. What the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was now proposing was for a general application of this order of priorities to all Army programmes for the future. Specifically he reminded his colleagues that the full 'ideal' scheme had already been judged by the C.I.D. to be 'by no means an over-insurance'. Its full capital cost was estimated at £46 million. He therefore urged, first, the acceptance forthwith of those items of the 'ideal' scheme which dealt with the northward extension of active defences in the Tyne, and local defences for the Forth and Clyde areas and, second, an examination of the next practicable stages of expansion from the aspects of personnel and production.

Since Sir Thomas Inskip's views about the place of the Army in the system of national defence were typical of those of many of his colleagues and became, in fact, the basis of official policy until well into 1939, they are worth quoting at length here.

'On the basis of the policy now proposed the Continental hypothesis ranks fourth in order of priority and the primary rôle of the Regular Army becomes the defence of Imperial commitments, including anti-aircraft defence at home.

This definition of the rôle of the Army is put forward by reason of the increasing demands made on our manpower and industrial resources by the risk of air attack which necessitates increases in the Air Force and in the Air Defence of Great Britain. It may be noted, however, that a number of recent events have occurred which go far to justify this change in policy. Thus it has, I understand, been suggested that France no longer looks to us in the event of war to supply an expeditionary force on the scale hitherto proposed in addition to our all-important co-operation on the sea and in the air.

Secondly, Germany has guaranteed the inviolability and integrity of Belgian territory, and there seems good reason for thinking that it would be in Germany's interests to honour this agreement.

Thirdly, external events have conspired to increase the probable demands on our forces in respect of our Imperial commitments overseas, and to render it possible that in a major war they would go far to absorb our military resources.

The inclusion in our defence plans of the provision of one contingent of the Field Force consisting of 4 divisions and 1 mobile division, capable of sustaining a part in continental

warfare from the outbreak of war, necessitates the accumulation in peace-time of very large reserves of equipment and material, and the maintenance of a considerable war potential. If the employment of the Army outside this country is to be related to the defence of Imperial commitments, the Regular Army will, of course, still require to be re-equipped with modern armaments. But it should be possible to effect a very substantial reduction in the scale of reserves and some reduction may also be found possible in the provision of tanks, especially of the heavier calibres.

It is, of course, impossible to foretell in what part of the world the Regular Army might be called upon to fight in defence of Imperial interests. But it seems reasonable to assume that the operations involved are unlikely to be waged with the sustained intensity or on the scale to be expected in the case of operations on the Continent.

This change in the rôle of the Army is put forward in conformity with the general policy outlined in this report, namely, that our main effort must be directed to the protection of this country against attack and the preservation of our trade routes, and that for ultimate success we look to our staying power and our capacity to mobilise our resources. On the basis of this policy, the increasing demand on our resources made by the Air and the Navy clearly have prior claim.

I must, however, warn my colleagues of the possible consequences of this proposal in order that they may share my responsibility for the decision to be taken with their eyes open. Notwithstanding recent developments in mechanised warfare on land and in the air, there is no sign of the displacement of infantry. If France were again to be in danger of being overrun by land armies, a situation might arise when, as in the last war, we had to improvise an army to assist her. Should this happen, the Government of the day would most certainly be criticised for having neglected to provide against so obvious a contingency. Nevertheless, for the reasons indicated, I am of opinion that there is no alternative but to adopt the more limited rôle of the Army envisaged in this report.'

Territorial Army

The D.R.C. in their Third Report proposed that the Regular Army should be supported by three contingents of the Territorial Army, each of 4 divisions, fully equipped on a modern scale, and able to proceed overseas 4, 6 and 8 months respectively after the outbreak of war.

This recommendation was not endorsed by the Cabinet who decided that the decision as to whether and when the proposals for reconditioning the Territorial Force can be implemented should be reserved for 3 years, or until such time as the industrial

situation of the country and its capacity for output brought this proposal within the range of actual possibilities.

There has since been considerable discussion as to the rôle of the Territorial Army. Hitherto conditions of output have operated to prevent any substantial expenditure in reconditioning the force. The Cabinet, however, agreed in principle in May last that the Territorial Army should receive sufficient equipment of the same type as the Regular Army to enable the whole 12 Territorial Divisions to be trained in peace at an estimated cost of £9½ million.

The policy now proposed would affect the rôle of the Territorial Army in the three following ways:

(i) First, the extension of the Air Defence of Great Britain would result in the conversion of further Territorial Divisions to A/A Divisions. The Establishment of the existing A/A Divisions is far greater than that of the normal Territorial Divisions, and it is a matter for consideration whether, if further A/A units are required, the conversion should proceed on the same basis as in the past, or whether (three or) four Territorial Divisions might not be converted to two new A/A Divisions. It should also be a matter for consideration whether existing Territorial units should be converted to undertake defence against low-flying attack.

(ii) The scale of air attack now envisaged on this country might well result in the dislocation of essential services, or in some loss of morale in crowded areas. There is also the problem of evacuation to be considered. Certain Territorial units might, therefore, be earmarked for duties in connection with the maintenance of order and of essential services in this country in time of war.

(iii) For the rest, units of the Territorial Army should be regarded as available to support the Regular Army in their primary rôle of Imperial defence overseas as soon after the outbreak of war as their training and equipment permits.⁽⁵⁹⁾

In Cabinet the Minister's proposals, and his arguments, met with general approval. It is clear that he, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for War all expected these proposals to result in a considerable saving on the Army Estimates and that this argument weighed heavily with several senior Ministers. The only doubt expressed by Mr. Hore-Belisha was that he might be asked to complete his arrangements for the 'new model' army too hurriedly and thereby be compelled to deprive his staff at the War Office of their Christmas holiday! Otherwise, he was emphatic that he did not differ in principle from

Sir Thomas Inskip and that he had, indeed, been coming to similar conclusions for some time past. The Cabinet, he claimed, had never accepted the whole of the War Office programmes for developing a field force for service in Europe. It would be an advantage to the Army to have its new rôle clearly defined, and he was sure that it was right to put the Continental commitment last.* The international situation was very different from that of 1914. Then Japan was a friend, Italy was a less likely enemy, and there was no Middle East commitment such as now existed in Palestine, and there was no danger from the air. Thus strategically, and because of the weight of public opinion there was no strong case for sending an army to the Continent. He himself had been finally converted to this view on the occasion of his visit to the French manoeuvres.⁽⁶⁰⁾† He had learned there that the Maginot Line needed only 100,000 men to hold it, thus leaving a large reserve for the French Field Army. He thought that when the French realised that Britain could not commit herself to send a substantial expeditionary force to Europe they would be the more inclined to accelerate the extension of the Maginot Line to the sea.

In this last connection the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had already explained to the Cabinet that he had based his proposals for the Regular Army on an earlier suggestion of Mr. Hore-Belisha's that France no longer looked to Britain, in the event of war, to supply an expeditionary force on the scale hitherto proposed. Now, in December, Mr. Hore-Belisha sustained that argument. In view of Britain's future contribution to the common cause in sea and air power, and in finance, the Secretary of State for War did not think that the French ought to expect Britain to furnish an army on the scale hitherto proposed, as well. France should be brought to realise that if Britain were subjected to air attack then she must concentrate her resources on her air defence first in preference to the provision of an expeditionary force. Finally, in answer to a question whether he would be able to provide the two mechanised divisions said to be wanted by the French, he replied that it would be possible to do this only by dividing the existing division into two parts.‡

One or two Ministers, and particularly the Foreign Secretary, expressed doubts about what was being proposed. While not disputing the broad assumptions of foreign policy made by Sir Thomas

* The investigation into the rôle of the Army, authorised in May 1937 (see above, p. 458) apparently did not take place in the form originally intended and was overtaken by the series of enquiries of the new government.

† i.e. in September 1937.

‡ It seems that, soon after his arrival at the War Office, Mr. Hore-Belisha tried to make changes to minimise the effect of the India defence plan on the Army and also to investigate the possibility of a Field Force of two mobile divisions for a European war. He was opposed on both subjects by the General Staff.⁽⁶¹⁾

Inskip, and while agreeing that the conditions were quite different from those of 1914, Mr. Eden said he still felt some apprehensions about the country's ability to assist her allies on land. Too much emphasis, he said, was being placed on the defensive. He was disturbed by the suggestion of the Secretary of State for War that people in Britain were opposed to sending forces abroad until security was assured at home. If the Channel Ports fell into the hands of Germany the country would not be safe, and if war were to take place in Western Europe then an attack on France by Germany was the most likely operation to be envisaged. He did not underestimate the value of the Maginot Line. But might not Britain still be called upon to help? M. Delbos, he agreed, had said that France expected Britain to provide only two mechanised divisions, and M. Daladier had said something of the same kind to the Secretary of State for War. But both statements had overlooked Belgium, or had been made on the assumption that Belgium could look after herself. If, however, there was an invasion of Belgium or Holland—and the Chiefs of Staff had argued repeatedly that this would be the most likely German choice of route to break into France—then help would be needed. In conclusion, however, he did not ask the Cabinet to change the order of defence priorities suggested by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. He merely said that he considered it essential that, when a decision had been taken, the French Government should be fully informed so that the two countries might consider together how best to provide for their joint defence—something which they had certainly not done so far.

At the end of a long debate the Cabinet accepted the recommendations of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. From now on the primary rôle of the Army was to be that of the defence of Imperial commitments, including anti-aircraft defence at home. Further Territorial units were to be converted to anti-aircraft divisions. Units of the Territorial Army were also to be regarded as available to support the Regular Army in the rôle of Imperial defence overseas as soon after the outbreak of war as their training and equipment would allow. And, finally, some part of both Regular and Territorial forces might have to undertake internal security duties should the scale of air attack envisaged result in some loss of morale in crowded urban areas.⁽⁶²⁾

Early in February 1938 the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence presented a further report to the Cabinet on defence expenditure in future years.⁽⁶³⁾ His object, as we have already seen in an earlier chapter,* was both to base defence planning during the next five years on the order of priorities established by the Cabinet

* See above, p. 289 ff.

at the end of 1937 and, as the corollary of that process, bring the total cost of the defence programmes for the five years 1937-41 within a figure agreed upon as financially acceptable by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and himself. The immediate task was to get from the Service Departments revised programmes based on the new accepted order of defence priorities and limited by the proposed budget.

The new proposals for the Army, as we have also seen, seemed attractive at least partly because they promised considerable savings on stores and equipment. And on the Field Force there was a saving in capital cost of some £14 million. Whereas the old Field Force had been a force of four divisions, one mobile division and three A/A groups expected to be capable of disembarking on the Continent within approximately fifteen days of mobilisation, the new forecast was for a force as follows:

- (a) one Corps of two divisions, plus a mobile division, plus two A/A groups with full reserves, ready to complete embarkation in twenty-one days;
- (b) two divisions plus a third A/A group ready to begin embarkation in forty days, with war equipment plus half scales of reserves;
- (c) a pool of equipment to enable either two Territorial or two Regular divisions to take the field after four months; the remainder of the Territorial Army would not, however, be able to take the field until after the eighth or tenth month of war.

It was assumed that this force would be called upon to operate in an 'Eastern' campaign and, in current circumstances, the most likely campaign was assumed to be one undertaken for the defence of Egypt. This particular assumption affected both the quality and type of stores and equipment required.⁽⁶⁴⁾ On the one hand, the modification in the rôle and composition of the Field Force enabled substantial reductions to be effected in the provision of tanks and reserves of ammunition. On the other hand, the assumption of an Eastern theatre necessitated heavy increases in some stores because of the distance from the source of supply. In particular, increased reserves of mechanical transport had been found necessary. Nevertheless a saving of some £14 million had been made. Proposed additional expenditure on the air defence of Great Britain, coupled with expenditure on new accommodation and amenities for both Regular and Territorial forces of nearly £40 million during the next five years, brought the total Army budget for that period up to £576 million, about £100 million more than forecast six months before. How much of this total would, in fact, be agreed to now depended

on arrangements to be made between the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, the Treasury and the three Service Departments on the assumption that no more than £1,570 million could be spent, in all, by 1941.⁽⁶⁵⁾

In the meantime the Secretary of State for War, Mr. Hore-Belisha, drew up a detailed memorandum on the organisation of the Army for its new 'limited liability' rôle, and presented it to his colleagues at the same Cabinet meeting at which the further report of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was discussed.⁽⁶⁶⁾ It is worth analysing here at some length.

In preparing the Army for war, the menace of air attack on Britain herself was assumed to be the primary consideration. Home defence, it was argued, was now in the first category of importance, and in a form unknown in 1914. The priorities here were air defence, internal security and coast defence. Nonetheless, and despite this undisputed priority, the Secretary of State for War warned the Cabinet that if it were decided to press ahead with further stages of the 'ideal' scheme for the air defence of Great Britain at that time, then such plans could be carried out only at the expense of other items of rearmament because of limited industrial capacity. Moreover, unless recruitment for the Territorial Army improved, then implementation of the 'ideal' scheme must reduce the number of Territorial divisions available for other purposes.*

Second in priority to home defence was the discharge of British commitments overseas, including defended ports on the trade routes. Garrisons for this purpose were, theoretically, based on the standard of providing the minimum insurance for internal security and defence against external attack. This minimum was itself based on the principle that wherever sea communications were liable to interruption by sea, land or air, the garrison should be maintained in peace-time at a strength adequate for defence at the outbreak of war. Alternatively, the necessary reserves should be held in the neighbourhood, available to reinforce at short notice. These Imperial commitments in peace, it was argued, could be discharged only by makeshifts and devices (e.g. short tour battalions, calling up Section A reservists etc.) which placed considerable strain on the resources of the Army and on the forbearance of the individual soldier. Within this class of commitments (i.e. excluding India and Burma) there was a total of 28 British battalions stationed overseas, the infantry equivalent of $2\frac{1}{2}$ divisions, together with the mobile division it was proposed to organise from the troops now in Egypt. The Minister further told his colleagues that, if resources were available and conditions permitted, it would be desirable to hold overseas in

* For details see above, p. 464.

addition one mobile division, one infantry division, and five battalions.

In connection with Imperial commitments the Minister pointed out that there were some 17,000 officers and men in a number of regular units composed of local personnel such as the King's African Rifles and the Sudan Defence Force. Most of these units were not under the control of the War Office. In addition there were a number of volunteer organisations on a territorial basis, e.g. the Ceylon Defence Force and the Singapore Volunteer Corps etc. 'Organisations of these kinds', the Minister wrote, 'whether on a regular or volunteer basis, are invaluable in reducing the number of regular British units to be maintained. Moreover, the psychological effect on the personnel of undertaking military responsibilities is of high value in counteracting subversive teaching. I therefore contemplate extending the system. . . .'

By far the largest part of the Regular Army stationed overseas in peace was absorbed by the garrisons of India and Burma. Since the reorganisation following the Indian Mutiny, the establishment of British troops in India had been reduced only by 20,000 men to a total of 57,000. The establishment of the native Indian Army had risen, in the same time, by 7,000 men to a total of 139,000, and they were backed by reserves of about 37,000 men. The Government of India had accepted, subject to the situation within and beyond the land frontiers of India permitting, certain commitments to despatch forces overseas to discharge Imperial tasks not directly connected with the defence of India. These included:

- (i) reinforcement for Egypt (including Aden)—one infantry brigade group;
- (ii) reinforcement for Singapore—one infantry brigade group;
- (iii) garrison for Anglo-Iranian oilfields—one infantry brigade group.

Because of the difficulties of the Mediterranean passage it was considered desirable to locate part of the Imperial strategic reserve, as well as its sources of supply, east of the Mediterranean basin. The present limitations on the availability of British forces in India to meet an emergency elsewhere to the best advantage were an inconvenient and perhaps dangerous restraint. In addition to the question of the actual proportion of British troops in India, and their availability as reserves, there were other questions which called for solution. Among them were the reorganisation of the Army in India on modern lines, the speed at which the reorganisation could be effected, and the consequent reduction of establishments.* Mr.

* See Appendix II.

Hore-Belisha stated that until decisions on these matters had been made there could be no satisfactory redistribution of the British Army as a whole in accordance with prevailing strategic needs, nor could there be, in accordance with the same needs, a suitable reorganisation of the rest of the Army.

The Secretary of State for War next dealt with the last of the Army's priorities—Continental commitments. Under the former rôle of the Army, as we have seen, it was planned to organise four divisions and a mobile division to be able to go to the Continent in D plus fifteen days. The War Office had asked for but had not received authority to proceed with what some had thought to be the logical implications of this rôle, which involved the despatch of twelve more reinforcing divisions, in echelons of four divisions at a time. Now it was proposed, so long as the new order of priorities held good, to despatch overseas within D plus twenty-one days, two regular divisions and a mobile division, equipped for an eastern theatre. They could be followed by the other two Regular divisions in D plus forty days. It was also proposed to hold a pool of equipment, including the necessary war reserves, sufficient to put two more divisions, Regular and Territorial, into the field in four months after the outbreak of war. By that time, it was estimated, industrial output would be catching up and the remaining divisions, up to ten in number, should be in possession of modern equipment ten months after mobilisation. As their state of training and the supply of stores and war reserves developed, these additional divisions could be available for defensive or counter-offensive operations. Authority had already been given for the Territorial Army to receive equipment of the same type as that of the Regular Army to enable it to be trained in peace.^{(67)*}

To this the Secretary of State for War added a warning:

'It will (thus) be seen . . . what troops may be at our disposal, if the need arises, to go to the assistance of an ally in the defence of her territory. It should be emphasised that their equipment and war reserves will not be on the Continental scale. They should be despatched only if the situation in the rest of the world permits, and it would be necessary for the General Staff to review the whole field of possible action open to the enemy before this could be determined. I suggest that it is of great importance that our potential allies should be left in no doubt as to the possibilities of direct assistance on our part and that the various alternative operations, whether in defence or in local offence, which our available reserves may have to undertake should be covered by any discussions or interchange of information which take place.'⁽⁶⁸⁾

* See above p. 457.

The Cabinet discussed this memorandum on 16th February 1938. At that meeting no objection was raised to the new and even more limited rôle of the Army. Indeed, it was suggested that, since the bulk of the Territorial divisions would not be sufficiently equipped to proceed abroad until ten months after mobilisation, then perhaps it was not worthwhile to maintain so many Territorials. Mr. Hore-Belisha replied that while he did not differ in principle from this view, nonetheless since 'unfortunately' public opinion would be much opposed to the disbandment of any part of the country's small forces, he felt sure that nothing should be done in this matter for the time being. How it was proposed to reconcile the two views, first that public opinion was against large scale Continental commitments and yet also against reducing the size of the Army as a whole was not made clear. In answer to a further suggestion that more Territorial divisions might be converted to anti-aircraft units, Mr. Hore-Belisha replied that, by avoiding converting a third Territorial division, he had been able to effect 'a very large economy'. Again, given the accepted overriding importance of home defence, particularly against air attack, it is interesting to see how far the equally accepted argument for economy could, in the end, prevail.

The one point on which there was general criticism of the Secretary of State's proposals was the use of the phrase that the Field Force 'should be equipped for an eastern theatre'. The Chancellor of the Exchequer wanted some such phrase as 'for general purposes'. The Foreign Secretary argued that the words 'for an eastern theatre' were 'politically undesirable'. To these criticisms Mr. Hore-Belisha—supported by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence—countered that some supposition was necessary in order to make possible the calculation of the scale of reserves and that, in fact, the Army had to be equipped for the demand most likely to be made upon it under the new assumptions. But the critics had their way. The Cabinet decided that in future communications on this subject the Secretary of State for War should use the phrase 'for general purposes'.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Since, however, the Secretary of State's memorandum was, at this stage, simply to inform Ministers of the implications of their decisions upon the rôle of the Army, and since the memorandum also raised a number of important questions which had yet to be answered in detail, it was now referred to the C.I.D. for further discussion.*

At this next stage several of Mr. Hore-Belisha's proposals came up against more detailed criticism. The first concerned the connection

* In fact, the memorandum was first considered by an *ad hoc* committee, under the Chairmanship of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, on 28th February, and then by the C.I.D. on 17th March.⁽⁷⁰⁾

between resources devoted to anti-aircraft defence and those devoted to other Army purposes. In his memorandum* the Secretary of State for War had proposed that, for the present, War Office commitments in respect of the air defence of Great Britain should be limited to the existing approved plan, which consisted of the original plan with an addition, which had been approved by the Cabinet, of the northward extension of the aircraft fighting zone and the provision of defences for the Forth and Clyde. His reason for this proposal—in words already quoted—was that ‘to proceed, unless the Cabinet in their review of priorities so desire, with further stages of the Ideal Scheme at the present time would be at the undue expense of other items of the rearmament programme, for which but a limited capacity is available’.⁽⁷¹⁾† More specifically, Mr. Hore-Belisha was afraid that any more demands on the Army for guns for A.D.G.B. would hamstring the essential re-equipping of the Army with guns for the Field Force.

The facts of this particular issue are of some interest. Under the A.D.G.B. plan so far approved a total of 640 guns were required, 288 4.5-inch and 352 3.7-inch. Of these only 7 3.7-inch guns had been received so far. Under the full ‘ideal’ scheme a total of 1,250 guns would be wanted. The Field Force, so far as artillery was concerned, was in no better shape. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lord Gort, told the C.I.D. that if the Field Force were sent abroad it would have no guns which could compare with those of foreign armies. The field guns of the British Army were still a 1905 pattern with ranges of 6,000 to 9,000 yards, whereas foreign field guns had ranges of 12,000 to 15,000 yards. The Army’s medium howitzers, which were required for counter-battery work, had a maximum range of 9,000 yards as compared with ranges up to 16,000 yards for comparable pieces in foreign armies. ‘In these circumstances it would be murder to send our Field Force overseas to fight against a first class power’. And such a contingency was not limited to the now virtually discarded ‘continental’ commitment; a campaign, for example, against Italy in North Africa would reveal some similar shortcomings. Moreover, these facts were well known to Germany and Italy as well as to our possible Allies in a future war.

Mr. Hore-Belisha asked whether the priority of home defence was so absolute that the establishment of the air defences of Great Britain was to be pressed forward without any regard whatsoever to any other commitment of the Army. The present available gun capacity was mainly taken up with naval and anti-aircraft require-

* See above, p. 474.

† See above, p. 464.

ments, and the production of new guns for field and medium artillery could be undertaken only as those priority requirements were completed. Capacity was now allocated for the conversion of 60-pounders, due to be completed in about two years; but production of a new medium howitzer, although badly needed, could not be undertaken under present arrangements for about another two years. Further, he pointed out that, so long as the full requirements of the 'ideal' scheme of A.D.G.B. remained a possible liability of the War Office, a sum of £37 million to provide for them would have to be retained in current War Office estimates. That would mean that a corresponding saving would have to be made in some other part of the War Office programme. But the real difficulty went even deeper than production and finance. In present circumstances the Air Ministry, by increasing their own programmes, automatically imposed demands on the War Office in respect of the air defence of Great Britain. The Admiralty made similar demands in respect of the defended ports. The War Office had no effective control over the extent of those demands. If the Cabinet picked upon one or two items in the War Office programme, and then insisted upon their completion to the exclusion of everything else, it was difficult for the War Office to keep any sort of balance in their overall plans.

As was to be expected Mr. Hore-Belisha met with strong opposition, both from those who felt that the War Office was not, in any case, keeping pace with the preparations of the Air Ministry in what had already been sanctioned for A.D.G.B., and from those who read into the proposal that A/A gun production should, after a certain interval, give way to the production of guns for the Field Force, a modification of the accepted principle that home defence should take first priority in the commitments of the Army. In the end there was a compromise. The Air Ministry had been told to produce thirty-eight squadrons for home defence, but the Home Defence Sub-Committee had not yet reported how many guns and searchlights were needed to co-operate with that number of squadrons. That report was to be completed as soon as possible. Whatever its terms, however, the War Office was not, for the present, to be required to include in its programme provision for any more A/A guns than those necessary to co-operate with the thirty-eight Squadrons; any new capacity for gun production over and above requirement was to be allocated to guns for the Field Force.

Secondly, the Secretary of State for War had urged upon his colleagues the desirability, if resources were available and conditions permitted, of holding a larger reserve of British troops overseas to be stationed in India, Palestine or Egypt. Although the recommendation was approved in principle, approval was given very grudgingly and on condition that its implementation would depend on other factors,

political and financial, which would require further examination in detail. Strong opposition came from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, who while claiming that he did not object to the strategic arguments in favour of the proposal, made it clear that he did not want Ministers to read into their approval anything 'which would imply that a decision taken now would subsequently be brought up as an agreed statement of policy which was necessarily to be implemented in full'. The Prime Minister's view was no more favourable.

Thirdly, the Field Force. The Secretary of State had outlined the new War Office plan for a force of seven divisions ready to be despatched abroad at intervals up to a total time of four months after the outbreak of war. Those divisions would be 'equipped for general purposes'. It now appeared that only the first echelon of those divisions would be equipped with full war reserves, and that the second echelon could be similarly equipped only by denuding the last two divisions. Further divisions would not then be ready for ten months at least and perhaps not for as long as fifteen months. The relevant discussion produced some apparent confusion on the distinction between 'continental scale' and 'general purposes'. What was clear, however, was the reaffirmation by the C.I.D. of a limited rôle for the Field Force, should it now be used. The despatch of seven divisions within four months was approved, but the second and third echelons, each of two divisions, were to be equipped with only half scale of war reserves of ammunition. Further, when the Cabinet approved this particular recommendation from the C.I.D. it reaffirmed the broad strategic priorities already suggested by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, and insisted that expenditure on these particular proposals concerning the Field Force be made subject to those priorities and within the finance which could be provided for the Army. Moreover, the Cabinet insisted that though approval had been given for a war policy in regard to the Field Force, nevertheless it had not given authority for the accumulation of reserves and potential for such extra divisions in time of peace.⁽⁷²⁾

Finally there was the problem of whether or not to tell potential allies of the implications for them of the newly started rôle of the Army. The Secretary of State for War had urged that they should be told, and some Ministers supported his view. The C.I.D. also agreed, recommending that the French Government be told of the decisions concerning the Field Force, and that this should be done in accordance with the decision, already reached, to inform that Government, first through ministerial or diplomatic channels, of the limitations on the extent of Britain's co-operation especially by land forces. This ministerial or diplomatic communication was to precede the staff

talks which, likewise, had already been authorised.⁽⁷³⁾ What was not yet decided was whether or not to give the Belgian Government the same information.*

While these discussions were going on and these decisions being made, some of the most important matters involved were, in fact, still in the melting pot. It has already been pointed out† that, after the Cabinet decision of February 1938, to allot a maximum of £1,570 million to the three Defence Departments for the five-year period 1937-41, each of these Departments was left with the need to cut its cost according to the new sums of money now decided upon.⁽⁷⁴⁾ The Secretary of State for War had been asked to reduce the estimates of his Department by some £82 million.⁽⁷⁵⁾ A further complication was that, in the light of the German seizure of Austria in March 1938, the Prime Minister made a statement in the House of Commons on 24th of that month in which, speaking of current rearmament plans, he said that 'there must be an increase in some parts of the programme, especially in that of the Royal Air Force and the anti-aircraft defences'.⁽⁷⁶⁾

In examining what was asked of them Mr. Hore-Belisha and his advisers decided that the best they could do was to reduce by £70 million the aggregate of £347 million previously estimated for capital expenditure during the quinquennium under discussion. Well over half of this total of £70 million was to be made possible by savings on two items, the Air Defence of Great Britain and (via the Territorial Army) the Field Force.‡ So far as the air defence of Great Britain was concerned a saving of just under £29 million was to be made providing 300 guns less than the total contemplated in the revised or 'ideal' scheme of 1937 and, of the smaller total now envisaged, 320 of the guns were to be of the obsolescent 3-inch compared with the modern guns originally anticipated under the 1937 scheme. A further £13 million was to be saved by making no provision for war equipment and reserves for the Territorial Army. The consequence of this was that there would be no reserve contingents to support the four divisions and one mobile division of the Field Force should they be despatched abroad, nor were such reinforcements now likely to be fit to send abroad for twelve months, or more, after war had broken out. 'Limited liability' could hardly go further.

A third saving, of £3 million, was proposed in connection with defended ports abroad.⁽⁷⁷⁾ A few weeks before this, in summarising his views on Mr. Hore-Belisha's memorandum on the new rôle of the

* On the staff talks see below, Part IV, Chapters XVI and XVII.

† See above, p. 295.

‡ See above, Chapter VIII.

Army, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had concluded with a warning.

'The second point I wish to bring to the notice of the Committee of Imperial Defence,' Sir Thomas Inskip wrote then, 'is the close relation between the standard of our naval strength and the organisation, peace disposition, and use in war of the Army. If British commitments abroad are to be given a second priority to home defence, the policy can only be justified on the assumption that our sea communications can be adequately defended by the Navy in future. In the last war we had a dominant Navy, while our foes were, in the main, confined to the European area. We can be certain of neither of these advantages in the future. If it should ever prove necessary, for financial reasons, to limit the strength of the Navy below the new standard of naval strength recommended by the Defence Requirements Committee our scattered garrisons overseas . . . might be entirely insufficient. Indeed, the abandonment of territories of lesser importance, and the concentration of our military and air forces in the more vital positions, might be the only solution.'⁽⁷⁸⁾

It is true that the Secretary of State for War was not now suggesting smaller garrisons at Gibraltar, Malta and Hong Kong, but he was recommending a saving of £3 million on the fixed defences of those bases. And, as part of the process, the defences of Malta were 'to remain as approved when we were not considering war with a Mediterranean Power'.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Perhaps the recent agreement with Italy, signed on 16th April 1938, gave promise of a better outlook in the Mediterranean. But could anyone seriously argue that that agreement had restored the pre-Stresa assumption that no war against Italy need be envisaged for the foreseeable future?

It would be wrong to argue that these further limitations on the rôle of the Army were accepted happily and without criticism by all Ministers. The latest proposals did not constitute, in the eyes of the Chiefs of Staff or of Ministers the defence that all considered the country ought to have; they were looked upon as the best that could be got having regard to the various limitations. Criticism was particularly severe on the subject of the proposed cuts in anti-aircraft defences. And the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence pointed out the ironic coincidence of Cabinet approval for the Field Force cuts just as the C.I.D. was about to consider an Intelligence report on the German army now said to be able to put into the field 4 to 6 armoured divisions and over 100 infantry divisions. But whatever the criticism and dissatisfaction, one thing is clear. The further limitations on the performance of the Army were accepted by the Cabinet and they were accepted mainly for financial reasons.⁽⁸⁰⁾

4. *The Army and the Defence of Egypt*

While these discussions about the rôle of the Army were going on throughout the winter of 1937-38 the Chiefs of Staff were preparing a major strategic appreciation on the Mediterranean, Middle East and North-East Africa.⁽⁶¹⁾ That appreciation was closely related to developing views about the rôle of the Army. The conditions of an 'eastern' or 'colonial' war could now be seen in relation to a specific area and, within that area, perhaps most of all to Egypt.

The primary rôle of the British Army in Egypt had long been the defence of sea communications and also of land communications where they formed an unavoidable part of the great sea routes. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 highlighted this problem for the first time; and Abercromby's expedition to recover Egypt in 1801 was, among other things, designed to get rid of that particular French threat for good. The opening of the Suez Canal, the British 'occupation' of Egypt in the eighteen-eighties and the gradual development of Alexandria as a naval base all added importance to what had now become a vital British strategic interest. But the rôle of the Army in the area remained ancillary to that of the Royal Navy.

The treaties which ended the First World War increased Britain's strategic stake in the Near and Middle East with Egypt's part as important as ever. But for many years there was no sense of urgency since there was assumed to be no major threat. France and Britain were, on the whole, agreed about spheres of interest—even if rivalry still remained—and Italy was one of the three countries against whom no defence preparations were thought to be necessary. The Italo-Abyssinian crisis of 1935 suddenly changed that. But although North Africa, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea areas had once again become the scene of a possible war Britain's strategy remained, as we have seen, primarily a naval one, and that particularly if she was forced into a one-to-one war against Italy.* The defence of Egypt by land and air forces in such a war would obviously be of critical importance both for the support of the Fleet and for the control of the Canal; but offensive operations would be largely confined to naval action.

Nonetheless, the strategic as well as the political picture in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular was changing, and not least as a result of the Italo-Abyssinian war. On the political side Italy's friendship could no longer be taken for granted and she might well become an enemy. Moreover, she was now in a strong position not only in the central Mediterranean and Libya, but in East Africa as well. To make matters worse, Italy was now fomenting

* See above, Chapter VI.

trouble for Britain by radio and press propaganda in very fruitful areas, encouraging Arab nationalism and profiting from the problems of Palestine. An area which, in the nineteen-twenties, had seemed secure on the basis of condominium and mandate now threatened to erupt into violence. On the military side the problems were no less serious. It now appeared that in the event of war a major land and air campaign might have to be mounted to defend or to attack from Egypt. Egypt was increasingly important for other reasons as well. With the risk that Malta might be isolated and have to be abandoned—a risk which, we have seen, was faced in 1935—Alexandria assumed still greater importance. With the widening of the area of potential trouble Egypt might have to serve as a base not only for the defence of the Canal but also for operations throughout North Africa and the Middle East as a whole. Again modern weapons, aircraft, tanks and mechanised transport, demanded more and not less room for manoeuvre and were bound to lead to an expansionist approach on the part of the military at the very time when political contraction seemed likely. Finally, the firm strategy of these years, at any rate until the summer of 1939, was that a simultaneous war against Germany, Japan and Italy would compel the Royal Navy virtually to leave the Mediterranean in order to deal with the higher priorities of Home Waters and the Far East, thus increasing the local responsibilities of the Army and the R.A.F. in Egypt.

Many of these matters, and of the strategic calculations connected with them, came up for discussion during the negotiations for the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of August 1936, and were reflected in the terms of the Treaty itself.⁽⁸²⁾ Negotiations for a treaty had taken place in 1930 but proved unsuccessful. Now, in the aftermath of the Abyssinian war the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, urged upon his colleagues the need for compromise in order to achieve a treaty which, he argued, could only strengthen Britain's position in Egypt.⁽⁸³⁾ Despite some differences of view on details all members of the C.I.D. were agreed that the 'governing consideration was that the basis of the Treaty should be an alliance founded on goodwill on both sides'.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The obvious difficulty was for the Egyptians to get those concessions they considered essential to the recognition of their sovereignty without denying to the British what the latter regarded as the essential safeguards of their vital strategic interests. In the end an agreed compromise was reached. The terms favourable to Britain are those which directly concern us here. The Royal Navy was to retain the use of Alexandria harbour for eight years with British troops stationed in or near Alexandria to guard the base and ensure its security. The British Army was, in peace-time, to be confined to the Canal Zone but was to be guaranteed the power of

rapid deployment, in an emergency, across Egypt and as far west as Mersa Matruh, well on the way to the Egyptian frontier. Finally, the Royal Air Force was to be given, in peace as well as in war, unfettered use of Egyptian air space.

We pick up this story again with the Chiefs of Staff Mediterranean and Middle East Appreciation of February 1938.⁽⁸⁵⁾ This study was divided into four main sections dealing first with single-handed war against Italy and then with several possible alliance situations, but the great importance of Egypt remained constant throughout these scenarios partly, at any rate, because it was assumed that, in the unlikely event of a single-handed war against Italy, Germany and maybe Japan would probably soon be drawn in. The Appreciation reaffirmed, as we have already seen,* that in a war against Germany, Italy and Japan at the same time, naval control of the eastern Mediterranean would almost certainly have to be surrendered to Italy—even if only temporarily. But that did not imply that the defence of Britain's position in the Middle East, based on Egypt, was also to be surrendered. Quite the reverse. It was assumed that Italian aggression in this theatre would take the form of an attack on Egypt from Libya. It was equally clear that 'our immediate aim will be the defence of Egypt and the operation of all our available forces must be directed to this purpose since a rapid and successful Italian offensive against Egypt would seriously affect our general strategic position and have most serious repercussions not only upon our position and prestige in Europe and the Far East, but also upon the Moslem countries of the Middle East⁽⁸⁶⁾ . . . Egypt is first in strategic importance. . . . The provision of reinforcements for the defence of Egypt must, therefore, have first priority'.⁽⁸⁷⁾ But war-time reinforcement was clearly restricted to the extent that Egypt would be isolated if naval control of the eastern Mediterranean and perhaps the Red Sea had to be surrendered. Hence, not only was Egypt to be given top priority in terms of war reinforcement but also high priority for peace-time stocking of stores and equipment.⁽⁸⁸⁾

The broad strategy envisaged for the security of Egypt was an initial defensive based on Mersa Matruh with a mobile force and aircraft operating in the Western Desert. Behind this cover reinforcements would be assembled both to strengthen the defence and to go over to an attack into Libya. What was envisaged was the deployment of a mobile division and two infantry divisions with perhaps a third division in reserve—in other words the whole of the field force might be involved. But, and particularly before reinforcements arrived it would be difficult for British troops on the spot to provide for the cover operation, help with internal security in Egypt

* See above, p. 419.

and protect the Canal Zone; it was therefore vital that reinforcements should arrive within one month after the outbreak of hostilities.

It was estimated that British land forces in Egypt by April 1938 would amount to one cavalry brigade, three artillery brigades (including A/A), three tank and six rifle battalions together with R.E. and R.A.S.C. companies.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Most of these units would be well below their authorised establishment. The Chiefs of Staff therefore recommended that 'without delay' one infantry brigade should be sent to Palestine as a Middle East reserve, units of the garrison in Egypt should be brought up to strength and that, as soon as the political situation in Europe allowed, the R.A.F. in Egypt should be strengthened.⁽⁹⁰⁾ 'Immediate' reinforcements after the outbreak of war for the mobile force, for the garrison of Mersa Matruh and for internal security duties were also spelled out in detail.⁽⁹¹⁾

On 23rd February 1938 the Cabinet authorised the Secretary of State for War to bring all units forming part of the garrison of Egypt up to their authorised establishment, although no decision in principle was taken on the subject of a Middle East military reserve.⁽⁹²⁾ A little later, on 25th March, it was decided to go ahead with the peace-time reinforcements for Egypt recommended by the Chiefs of Staff in their Appreciation and that 'notwithstanding recent events in central Europe'.⁽⁹³⁾ By now what was to be the war-time picture was already becoming clear. The security of Egypt was still vital for the protection of the sea route through the eastern Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. In addition, however, the rôle of the Army—and of the Royal Air Force—in this same area was developing a new significance. From Egypt the enemy would be fought offensively as well as defensively; and with each new development, it became clearer that the security not only of a route but of the whole of North Africa and the Middle East would increasingly depend on an Egypt second only in importance to the United Kingdom as a strategic base.*

* For further developments in the Middle East in 1939, see below, pp. 521-24.

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| (65) C.P. 24(38); D.P.(P)16. See also Cab. Cons. 5(38) | 474 |
| (66) Cab. Cons. 5(38); C.P. 26(38) | 474 |
| (67) Cab. Cons. 20(37)4 | 476 |
| (68) C.P. 26(38) | 476 |
| (69) Cab. Cons. 5(38)11 | 477 |
| (70) C.I.D. 313th Mtg. | 477 |
| (71) C.P. 26(38) | 478 |
| (72) Cab. Cons. 16(38) | 480 |
| (73) C.I.D. 1405-B | 481 |
| (74) C.P. 24(38) and Cab. Cons. 5(38) | 481 |
| (75) D.P.(P)25, Appendix II and Enclosure | 481 |
| (76) H.C. 5s, Vol. 333: 1410 | 481 |
| (77) D.P.(P)25 and Cab. Cons. 21(38), p. 19 and ff. | 481 |
| (78) D.P.(P)21, para. 24 | 482 |
| (79) D.P.(P)25, Appendix II | 482 |
| (80) Cab. Cons. 21(38), pp. 20-25 | 482 |
| (81) C.O.S. 691 (also D.P.(P)18). The paper was dated 21st February 1938, but had been in preparation over the past seven to eight months. | 483 |
| (82) For discussions preceding the Treaty see C.I.D. 274th-277th Mtgs. and related papers noted in those minutes; for the Treaty and related papers see Cmd. 5270 and 5360. | 484 |
| (83) C.I.D. 277th Mtg. | 484 |
| (84) C.I.D. 274th Mtg. | 484 |
| (85) C.O.S. 691 (D.P.(P)18) | 485 |
| (86) D.P.(P)18, para. 67 | 485 |
| (87) Ibid., paras. 75 and 77 | 485 |
| (88) Ibid., para. 255. For detailed evidence on the priority to be accorded to British troops in Egypt of up-to-date equipment and armaments see C.I.D. 303rd Mtg. and associated papers | 485 |
| (89) D.P.(P)18, para. 321 | 486 |
| (90) Ibid., para. 262 | 486 |
| (91) Ibid., para. 341 | 486 |
| (92) Cab. Cons. 9(38) | 486 |
| (93) C.I.D. 315th Mtg. | 486 |

PART III

CHAPTER XIII

THE ARMY: THE ACCEPTANCE OF A CONTINENTAL COMMITMENT, 1939

Introductory Note

IN THE SIX MONTHS following the Munich crisis of September 1938 there was a fundamental change in views about the part of the Army in any future war. Briefly, that change amounted to an acceptance of the view, in the end explicitly stated in the course of Staff conversations with the French, that ability to take part in a Continental war must be regarded as a major commitment of the Army and that such a commitment would involve very much larger land forces than had been previously contemplated. That change was brought about by three initially separate but ultimately connected developments. The first arose from the pressure of French opinion, both official and unofficial, urging the government in London to reconsider its views about priorities for the British Army. Chamberlain and his colleagues varied in their response to that pressure but, gradually, nearly all of them gave way. The second development was from within the Cabinet itself, aided by the Chiefs of Staff. Not only did the latter now again begin to emphasise what their predecessors in 1933 and 1935 had already pointed out, that the defence of the Low Countries and France should be regarded as part of the defence of Britain herself and therefore rank as part of the top priority for the Army, but they and the Secretary of State for War were now obviously aware that, on its present supply basis, the Army could face a period of acute shortage of all kinds of equipment in the months immediately after the outbreak of war. Such a shortage might hit the Army at the very time when its help to Allies counted most and, once lost, such an opportunity might well not occur again. Finally, but only after the March crisis of 1939, Ministers and Chiefs of Staff for the first time openly admitted that both the Regular Army and the Territorial Army were desperately short of men for some of their existing commitments, let alone for more demanding ones. The

decisions then taken, to increase the size of the Territorial Army and to introduce conscription, made available, in addition to continuous manning of home A/A defences, the manpower for a very large Army on something approaching continental standards. When the concept of that 'new model' Army was fitted into the framework of Anglo-French staff talks of the summer of 1939, the wheel, so far as the Army was concerned, had turned full circle back to 1918.

One further point is worth noting here. This new policy concerning the size and possible deployment of the Army represented the most radical change in Britain's strategic plans in the year between Munich and the outbreak of war. But the change took six or seven months to develop. The immediate impact of Munich was not profound whatever its effect in the long-term. And, in the long-term, there were other causes of change besides Munich, not least the final overthrow of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.

1. *Pressure from the French, Winter 1938-39*

From September 1938 onwards there appeared, to the Government in London, to be a steadily growing body of opinion in France that the strategic situation arising from Germany's acquisition of the Sudetenland now necessitated a far larger military effort on land from Britain. The first sign of this development in French thinking came during the visit of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, to Paris on 23rd-24th November 1938. That visit itself arose from Chamberlain's wish to cement the good friendship of the recent Anglo-Italian agreement with a personal visit to the Duce in Rome; and, to that end, it was also considered essential to reassure the French Government that no moves to appease the Axis Powers implied any weakening of Britain's close ties with France.⁽¹⁾ Further, talks in Paris might well provide an opportunity to encourage M. Daladier to hasten to put his country's defence in order and to pull his countrymen together into greater unity. Already, in early October, Sir Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador in Paris, had urged the need of some move to stir the French to greater action. The Ambassador, in fact, spoke to MM. Daladier and Bonnet early in November of Britain's rearmament plans, asking them whether they agreed with the view that talks with the dictators were more likely to be effective from a position of strength than from one of weakness. Both French statesmen had 'heartily' agreed, and had emphasised their realisation of the vital importance of Anglo-French collaboration in a renewed attempt—perhaps in a month or two—to reach such a general settlement with Germany and Italy.

It should not be thought, however, that Chamberlain and his colleagues were contemplating doing more than reassure the French at this stage and perhaps spur them to greater efforts on their own behalf. There was certainly no intention either of committing Britain more clearly than before to the side of France or of adopting a harsher line towards the dictators. Chamberlain himself said that he looked upon his forthcoming visit to Paris more as a gesture to France than likely to mark any specific development in Anglo-French relations.^{(2)*} And Lord Halifax showed no fear, at this point, that the forthcoming Franco-German Declaration—drawn up in the form of a general expression of the desire of both countries for peaceful relations, the recognition of existing frontiers and the resolution of future disputes by consultation—might separate France from Britain. He saw the future as Germany dominant in central Europe, with France and Britain supreme in western Europe, the Mediterranean and overseas—terms very similar to those in which Ribbentrop welcomed Coulondre, the new French Ambassador to Berlin.⁽³⁾ Provided Britain and France maintained sufficient strength to make attack upon them hazardous, Lord Halifax saw no harm in a Franco-German rapprochement; indeed, he felt that relations between the two countries must have a fresh start. He did not believe that France would go to the length of contracting out of Europe altogether. The greater danger was French defeatism; and hence the importance of encouraging her by precept and example.

The Cabinet discussed the Paris visit twice before the Prime Minister left.⁽⁴⁾ The agenda at those meetings covered a wide range of possible topics, and possible Anglo-French defence measures were among them. For this purpose the Chiefs of Staff had written two papers for the guidance of the Prime Minister and in anticipation of French pressure to extend collaboration. The Chiefs of Staff were quite adamant that, although Germany could now greatly increase the strength of her attack on France because of her gains in Austria and Czechoslovakia, the United Kingdom could in no circumstances do anything more than fulfil her existing offer to send, initially, two divisions to the help of the French; and even those divisions would be deficient in many items of modern equipment, particularly in tanks. The Chiefs of Staff also shied away from developing staff talks beyond the fairly low level discussions which had taken place during the past summer unless it was now thought necessary to regard Italy as hostile; in that case naval staff talks on a higher level would be important. Any more discussions on Army co-operation,

* Writing to his sisters on 6th November about this forthcoming visit, Chamberlain said he thought it necessary to encourage Daladier 'to do something' to put French defences in order and pull his people together, and also to prove to the French that Britain was their friend whatever her desire to appease Germany and Italy.

which at present covered only the assembly of an expeditionary force, would be dangerous as tending to commit the United Kingdom to a more detailed part in French military plans than was desirable.^{(5)*}

During the Paris talks on 24th November the longest part of the discussion was, in fact, on defence. At the start M. Daladier emphasised the importance of very close co-operation between the two countries; Mr. Chamberlain, however, followed the cautious advice of his own Chiefs of Staff, and he also expressed scepticism of M. Daladier's statement that, while the present French production of aircraft was only 80 machines a month, yet this would be raised to a monthly total of 400 in six months time. M. Daladier also stated his readiness to reaffirm publicly the undertaking given by M. Delbos in December 1936, that if Britain became the victim France considered herself bound to go to her help. In the end Mr. Chamberlain agreed to further staff talks, without committing himself to any but the vaguest definition of their scope.

Once Mr. Chamberlain was back in England, however, a more urgent note was soon heard. At a meeting on 15th December 1938 the C.I.D. discussed a memorandum by the Secretary of State for War on the state of preparedness of the Army, in relation to the rôle already defined for it earlier that year.[†] At that meeting Lord Halifax, while agreeing that its part in the air defence of Great Britain was the principal responsibility of the Army and that the country was bound to give the highest priority in defence to its most urgent needs, into which the provision of a field force did not enter, nevertheless went on to say:

'... that, when he was in Paris, the French pressed very strongly the necessity for a contribution by Great Britain on land. This pressure had been withstood, and it had been pointed out to the French that, as we did not possess a field army which was fully equipped for war at the present time, further discussion of such assistance would be academic. He had had a talk with the British Ambassador in Paris and with the Military Attaché, who were both emphatic that the French would return to the charge on this subject, and, although he was the last to wish to see a large British army involved on the Continent, he was bound to point out that a time might come when the French would cease to be enthusiastic about their relations with Great Britain if they were left with the impression that it was they who must bear the brunt of the fighting and slaughter on land.'

* For details of Staff talks which had already taken place, see below, Chapter XVI..

† For this rôle see above Chapter XII. For further discussion on the Secretary of State's memorandum see below, p. 503 and ff.

When it was countered that, 'whatever the French might think, their interests were so bound up with ours that they could not afford to stand aloof from us', Lord Halifax went further and, in doing so, showed that the Paris talks had had a serious impact on his own views. He argued that there was 'some slight danger that, if Germany attempted to come to an agreement with France for her to stand aside while Germany attacked us, they might be tempted to accept the German request if attention was not paid to their requests for assistance on land'.⁽⁶⁾

In fact the French did soon press again for some satisfaction. On 28th December the British Ambassador sent a despatch to Lord Halifax in which he enclosed a long report by the British military attaché in Paris.⁽⁷⁾ This report was an analysis of the changed strategic situation with which France was now faced, together with an appreciation of the probable trend of French military policy. The military attaché's report analysed the change in the overall strategic situation resulting from Germany's growth in strength since 1933, and from the accompanying collapse of France's attempt to guarantee herself by the alliances which she had built up after the first World War. France no longer had anything to hope for from the Little Entente and, with that change, the main reason for the Franco-Russian Pact had also disappeared; for France had, up to Munich, expected not so much direct military assistance from Russia as to find in Russia a source of arms and ammunition for her other allies. Finally, France now found herself faced not only by an ambitious Germany containing a population almost double her own, but a Germany with Italy as an ally. And Italy was even now adopting a hostile attitude towards France and making claims which, supported by Germany, might conceivably lead to war.

In these circumstances France pinned her hopes, above all, on the friendship of Great Britain. Not only, however, was friendship with Britain the keystone of French military policy; in the opinion of the French General Staff, friendship and co-operation with France must also be the keystone of Britain's strategy. On this assumption the French, it was argued, now demanded from Britain a solid measure of military assistance on land in addition to that provided by the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. The military attaché then went on in words which, although they represented only his own opinion of developments, nevertheless constituted a line of thinking which was soon to have considerable weight in the British Government's counsels.

'In these circumstances it may be useful to refer your Excellency to my despatch . . . [of] 5th December 1938, which dealt with certain correspondence which appeared in *The Times* not long ago. This correspondence appeared over well-known signatures

and was directed against what may be termed the "Continental Commitment". The theory on which the arguments were based numbers among its adherents many distinguished people; it is that Britain committed an error in the last war in engaging the bulk of her forces in France and Flanders, and that never again must a British army of any size be landed in Europe. This theory is reinforced by the further argument that, in view of the power of the air arm today, the transfer and maintenance of an expeditionary force of any size on the continent is no longer possible. Any such arguments must, however, be based on the supposition that the French and the Belgians are able and willing to hold their frontiers against German attack, assisted only by our air force and by the action of our fleet. Such a view does not at all coincide with that of the French General Staff. In the first place they consider that the access which Germany has now gained, and will quickly develop, to the raw materials of South-Eastern Europe has rendered the blockade far less effective than it was in the last war. And in the second place, they do not consider that they are in a position to defend themselves against Germany without military assistance from us. Furthermore, as was most forcibly expressed to the military attaché by a senior staff officer not long ago, due regard must be paid to French public opinion. There is always latent in France the view that Britain is quite willing to fight her battles on the continent with French soldiers; and that this idea is justified to some extent at any rate is proved by the opinions expressed in *The Times* correspondence already referred to. The French, however, have no idea of admitting this principle. They recognise freely the financial effort which is inherent in the possession of a fleet and an air force like ours, but they go on to state that a financial effort in the circumstances of today is not enough. They say that what is required is an "effort du sang". To the argument that no country can afford to maintain simultaneously a great fleet, a great air force and a great army, they reply "a professional army, no; but a conscript army is much cheaper; and for the price of her present professional army Great Britain could maintain a national army of far larger proportions". They do not expect a military effort on the scale of their own. They do not even demand the immediate despatch to France of an expeditionary force in the event of war, although they consider that this would have a great effect, both material and moral. But they do demand that at the end of a limited period, say three months, Great Britain should be in a position to despatch to this country an army of a size to do something to redress the balance between France and Germany.'⁽⁸⁾

The military attaché made two further points in this particular report. First that, for a variety of reasons, little could be expected by France from Poland in the event of a war with Germany; and con-

versely, that it was unlikely that France would engage in a war to preserve the Polish Corridor or to save Poland from paying her contribution to an independent Ukrainian republic. The second point, of far more interest from the point of view of traditional British strategy, concerned Belgium. Since the disappearance of Czechoslovakia as a military power, it was argued, the French General Staff considered that they were again threatened by something comparable to the strong right flank attack of 1914. In their view their position in the face of this threat had been greatly weakened by the Belgian declaration of neutrality of 1936.* Previous to this declaration military liaison between France and Belgium had been very close, and arrangements had been made for the despatch within a very few hours of forces sufficient to make it possible that any German invasion could be held on the line of the Meuse and the Albert Canal. Now, however, all contact between the General Staffs had been broken off, chiefly on the initiative of the French, who did not wish to run the risk of their plans being divulged to other countries. The French General Staff would, in fact, like to renew their former intimacy with the Belgians; but there seemed, currently, to be little hope of that, despite the fact that during the crisis the relations between the General Staffs of the two countries had been entirely correct and friendly. Although, during the Munich crisis, Belgian troops had been concentrated on the frontier with France, that had been brought about by internal political conditions and not through fear of France. The Belgian General Staff had, in fact, been entirely satisfied by a French assurance that in no circumstances was any movement of French troops across Belgian territory contemplated except at the invitation of the Belgians. It seemed probable, therefore, the British military attaché concluded, that although in the case of a repetition of the events of 1914 Belgium might again be expected to defend herself, it was also possible that in default of precise arrangements in time of peace, French assistance might again arrive too late to save much of Belgium from an invader, or even much of the Belgian army.

During early January 1939 the British Ambassador in Paris sent several more despatches to London on the same or related themes. All, in one way or another, drew attention to the same point that France felt herself threatened—particularly if Germany were joined as an aggressor by Italy—and that in her danger her reliance upon help on land, as well as by sea and in the air, from Great Britain had greatly increased as a result of recent events.⁽⁹⁾

On 12th January these despatches from Paris were forwarded to the C.I.D. for consideration by the Chiefs of Staff.⁽¹⁰⁾ The latter

* See below, Chapter XVI, Section 3.

were asked, as a matter of urgency to estimate whether France could withstand an attack on her by Germany across the Franco-German frontier alone, or across the frontier and/or through the Netherlands and Belgium, 'on the assumption that no larger degree of direct naval, military or air assistance from the United Kingdom will be available than is at present contemplated'. The Chiefs of Staff were also asked to give their views on these same problems on the assumption that Italy entered such a war on the side of Germany so that France would expect to be attacked across the Franco-Italian frontier in addition.

The Chiefs of Staff replied that, because of the Maginot Line, France should be able to hold an attack across the Franco-German frontier. A German attack through Belgium, however, posed more serious problems. The Belgians, it was argued, might be able to hold up a direct attack from the East for some 14 days on the River Meuse. The report then went on:

'The delay imposed by the Belgians might suffice to allow French troops to come to their assistance but, according to our information, it is unlikely that the French would send troops into Belgium unless more substantial support than is at present contemplated were forthcoming from us. If the German Army were able to advance through Belgium, as it might well be, the French would have to meet an attack directed against the Franco-Belgian frontier which is the weakest part of their defences. Moreover, the French forces would perforce be deployed on a wider front than if Belgian neutrality had been respected. The conclusion is that in these circumstances France would be less able to withstand a German attack.'

Should Italy join in the war it was the view of the Chiefs of Staff that her individual efforts would not on their own give the French much cause for anxiety. On the other hand, the dispersion of the French forces consequent upon the intervention of Italy would seriously weaken the ability of France to resist attack by Germany.⁽¹¹⁾

This report is interesting not least because it apparently lacked any sense of urgency. Nor were there any comments on what might be done to help provide against the dangers analysed—although in fairness it should be remembered that the committee had not been asked to comment on that particular point. But there was a more urgent note in a related report made by the Chiefs of Staff at about the same time. On 23rd January the Foreign Policy Committee* of the Cabinet invited the Chiefs of Staff, through the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, to consider and report on whether the

* From now on referred to as F.P.C.

integrity of Holland constituted so vital a strategic interest to the United Kingdom that the latter ought to intervene in the event of aggression against Holland by Germany; and should the answer to that question be in the affirmative, then what military action could the United Kingdom take if France and Belgium were neutral or if they were allies.⁽¹²⁾

The conclusions of the Chiefs of Staff in answer to those questions are interesting as illustrating both their view of the importance of the issues at stake and also of the present inadequacy of the military preparations of the United Kingdom in face of such a possible crisis. From the point of view of sea, air and land operations a successful German attack upon Holland was regarded as an initial move for subsequent operations against the United Kingdom. Germany could use Dutch ports for her submarines and light naval forces; she could bring a much heavier weight of air attacks to bear upon London and other targets, and achieve greater depth for the defence of the Reich; and if German troops were established in Holland this would facilitate an attack upon Belgium from the north and east simultaneously, leading to an ability to develop a strong attack upon the Franco-Belgian frontier and upon France herself.

'On purely strategical grounds, therefore,' wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'we have reached the conclusion that, if our defensive preparations were reasonably complete, we should have no doubt in advising that the integrity of Holland constitutes so vital a strategic interest to this country that we should intervene in the event of aggression by Germany against Holland. The only doubt in our mind arises from the present strength of our defensive preparations. Our examination . . . of the military action which could be taken shows that there is no hope of preventing Holland being overrun, and that the restoration of her territory would depend upon the later course of the war.'

Nevertheless, the strategical importance to the British Empire of Holland and her colonies is so great that a German attack on Holland must, in our opinion, be regarded as an attack on our own interests. In Europe, the domination of Holland would be a first step to giving Germany a great initial advantage in a subsequent attack on this country. Overseas, the destruction of Dutch Authority in the East Indies would weaken our position throughout the Far East.

In our view, our intervention would almost inevitably bring in Italy, and possibly Japan, against us. We could not, at the outset, rely on the assistance of any major Power except possibly France. Even with France as our ally, a war against Germany, Italy and Japan would under any conditions impose a very severe strain upon the Empire.

If we were compelled to enter such a war in the near future

we should be confronted with a position more serious than the Empire has ever faced before. The ultimate outcome of the conflict might well depend upon the intervention of other Powers, in particular of the United States of America.

Nevertheless, . . . failure to intervene would have such moral and other repercussions as would seriously undermine our position in the eyes of the Dominions and the world in general. We might thus be deprived of support in a subsequent struggle between Germany and the British Empire. In our view, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that failure to take up such a challenge would place Germany in a predominant position in Europe and correspondingly lower our prestige throughout the world. Therefore, we have, as we see it, no choice but to regard a German invasion of Holland as a direct challenge to our security.⁽¹³⁾

These conclusions were endorsed by the F.P.C.,⁽¹⁴⁾ and subsequently by the Cabinet also. The Cabinet recorded the opinion that any attempt by Germany to obtain military control over Holland by threat of force would be such evidence of Germany's intention to dominate Europe by force as to require the United Kingdom to treat it as a *casus belli*. The Foreign Secretary had already initiated a diplomatic approach to the French Government in regard to Holland because of rumours of a possible German attack upon that country.* In this approach Lord Halifax was authorised to make clear to the French Government the seriousness with which H.M. Government would view a German attack on Holland, and to endeavour to learn the views of the French on that subject. In return, should the French use the occasion to raise the parallel case of Switzerland and enquire whether, if Germany invaded Switzerland, and France therefore declared war upon Germany, the United Kingdom would go to the help of France, Lord Halifax was also authorised to answer in the affirmative. Similar diplomatic enquiries in the same sense were being addressed to the Belgian Government.⁽¹⁵⁾

Lord Halifax thereupon wrote a memorandum on this same subject for the D.P.(P), a sub-committee which was by now the most active organ of the Cabinet in its increasingly urgent consideration of broad plans for national and imperial defence.⁽¹⁶⁾ It was clear from the conclusions of the Chiefs of Staff, the Foreign Secretary argued, that though France might be able to hold the Maginot Line against Germany alone, her position would be serious if Germany attacked through Holland and Belgium, and would become most precarious in the face of a joint attack by Germany and Italy through Belgium and Holland and Switzerland, coupled with Italian action

* These rumours were one reason why the Chiefs of Staff had been asked to report specifically on this particular issue.

in North Africa. In view of the vital interest to Britain of the defence of the West, and of the fact that, if France were defeated, Britain would have no prospect of maintaining her present position in the world, Lord Halifax drew particular attention to the political implications of the views of the Chiefs of Staff as they affected the rôle of the British Army in the event of a war in which Britain would be fighting beside France. He went on:

'It is clear that in any combination of circumstances the French front can only be expected to hold for a limited period, and that in the least favourable contingency it may hold for a short time only. In these circumstances it seems essential that we should reach a decision on the ways and means of coming to the assistance of France on land on a larger scale and within a shorter time than has hitherto been contemplated. A favourable decision on this point, even if it cannot be put into effect at once, will have a tremendous moral effect in France, where we are faced by the danger that a section of opinion, appalled at the prospect of being left unaided to fight a land war on two or three fronts, may slowly swing over to a policy of complete surrender.'⁽¹⁷⁾

Lord Halifax then proceeded to summarise recent evidence of French official and public opinion on this subject. French demands on Britain for greater support on land went back to the Paris visit of 24th November 1938. At that time, M. Daladier had argued that it was not enough for Britain to send two divisions after three weeks; more divisions were needed and, as far as possible, they should be motorised. Then there was the evidence already described, of the British military attaché in Paris, throughout December and again in early January 1939. Further, there had been discussions between Sir Robert Vansittart and the French Ambassador in London on 24th January. On that occasion the French Ambassador had said that if England alone were attacked by Germany, there would certainly be one current of opinion in France which would be inclined to question French help for England because of the latter's failure to guarantee full military support for France. The Ambassador had no doubt that objections of this sort in France would be overcome. But he also said that people in England ought to understand the feelings of Frenchmen who felt that they were going to have to suffer casualties on land which would be vastly greater than those in the air or on the sea, and who knew well that their own manpower was not sufficient to enable them to hold their own against Germany and Italy at the same time. Again, on 29th January, M. Daladier had enquired anxiously of the British Ambassador in Paris whether or not Great Britain would soon introduce compulsory military service. When told that this seemed to be impossible, M. Daladier expressed the fear that the equipment of Britain's small army was out of date,

and that if any French plan for the mechanisation of the Regular Army could eventually be of use he would gladly make it available. The French Government had again expressed similar views in their reply, on 1st February, to a British note on the dangers of a German attack upon Holland and/or Switzerland and of Britain's determination to act in this event. After expressing their 'delight' at this 'particularly important guarantee of the common security of Western Europe', the French note then continued:

'The gravity of the situation, in view of the threats described in the British memorandum, demands on the part of all the interested nations the immediate and unreserved adoption of every measure liable to increase the human and material forces already at their disposal. The French Government, for their part, are ready for this community of efforts and sacrifices which, corresponding with a real community of responsibilities, will give Franco-British collaboration its full material and moral efficacy. From this double point of view recourse to conscription appears an essential element of the effective participation of Great Britain in the organisation of common defence on the continent.'⁽¹⁸⁾

In the light of later events it may be argued that the French were not, in fact, doing as much to further the cause of common defence as they claimed. Some things, however, are beyond dispute. First, the British Government was undoubtedly being pressed by Paris to make a much larger contribution on land to the common cause, and the existing plans for the British Regular army were now considered quite inadequate by the French. Second, the French were clear that France would find herself seriously out-manned if she had to face Germany and Italy in combination, and also that an ally who concentrated on air and sea-power was not an ally who was facing an equality of sacrifice in human life. The war, for the French, was bound to be fought out on land at least as much as at sea and in the air. Huge casualties were possible. Such a loss of men was as critical to France as to Britain. And the French Government and public could see no reason why France should pay a disproportionate part of the price of war in these terms. Finally, the Foreign Secretary was clearly convinced of the weight of these arguments and was endeavouring to persuade his colleagues to act upon them.⁽¹⁹⁾

2. *Cabinet Debate on the Rôle of the Army, Winter 1938-39*

So much for pressure from the French. Meanwhile, pressure to consider a major change in the concept of the rôle of the Army in a future war was also beginning to build up within the Government

itself. The change was not a sudden one. Nor did the first moves in the process suggest such a change at all.

After the Munich crisis a Ministerial Committee, known colloquially as the 'gaps' Committee, had been set up to consider what acceleration was necessary in defence programmes. The Secretary of State for War had placed before the Committee some suggestions concerning improved equipment for the Territorial Army, suggestions which received a sympathetic reception from the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. The Committee, however, decided that the proposals involved changes in principle in existing approved programmes and instructed Hore-Belisha to bring them before a full meeting of the C.I.D. Hore-Belisha therefore prepared a detailed memorandum which was considered by the C.I.D. on 15th December 1938.⁽²⁰⁾

In his memorandum the Secretary of State pointed out that the Army would not be able, under present arrangements, to meet its responsibilities in accordance with the present approved limited rôle. He therefore asked for approval for additional expenditure on the Army amounting to £81 million. The main items in his proposals were the split of the mobile division into two smaller divisions; further stores, reserves and units to enable the first two divisions of the Field Force to adopt counter-offensive as well as defensive measures;⁽²¹⁾ full scale reserves and ammunition for the next two divisions; the equipment of two 'colonial' divisions to be formed out of existing non-Field Force units, e.g. in Palestine where 18 battalions were at present absorbed; the provision of war equipment and reserves for four infantry divisions of the Territorial Army and finally, the provision of the necessary training equipment for the remainder of the Territorial Field Army.^{(22)*}

In explaining his memorandum to the C.I.D. Hore-Belisha emphasised three points. First that, 'in the light of their memories of the early days of the last War', it was inconceivable that the further contingents of the Field Force should be allowed to remain deficient

* It will be remembered that in March 1938 approval had been given for a Field Force of

- (a) two regular divisions and one mobile division with full reserves of ammunition to embark in 21 days;
- (b) two regular divisions with war reserves of ammunition at one-half scale of those in (a) to embark in 40 days;
- (c) a pool of equipment and ammunition sufficient to despatch two further divisions overseas in 4 months with war reserves as in (b).

When, in April, he accepted a cut of £70 million in the War Office 5-year plan Mr. Hore-Belisha stated that it would be impossible to provide the equipment required for the pool referred to in (c) above; and that therefore, the two further divisions mentioned in (c) would not be available in 4 months and might not be available for 12 months or more after the outbreak of war. The original five divisions would thus receive no reinforcements during that period. For all these details in full see above, Chapter XII.

of both units and ammunition as they were by the decisions of the previous spring. Second, that there was no general authority to supply the requirements of the 18 units in Palestine; the War Office, in order to supply the day-to-day needs of these battalions, had had to borrow vehicles and ammunition from units of the Field Force. This was, he argued an 'intolerable situation'. Finally, no equipment had been authorised for the Territorial Army (excluding the anti-aircraft divisions) beyond the bare minimum for training needs.

At this point Hore-Belisha received very little support from his colleagues. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, considered it wrong to try to draw a distinction between Army units employed in the air defence of Great Britain and the rest of the Army. 'The air defence of Great Britain was, in fact, the principal rôle of the Army'. He also argued, in reply to the Foreign Secretary's reminder that the French now appeared to want more help, on land, from Britain and might turn to Germany if they did not get it, 'that, whatever the French might think, their interests were so bound up with ours that they could not afford to stand aloof from us'. In answer to which Hore-Belisha hastened to add that he was not trying to alter the rôle of the army but simply to make it capable of doing what it was already authorised to do. In the end, the C.I.D. compromised by agreeing to refer the memorandum to the Chiefs of Staff for examination and report at as early a date as possible.

The report of the Chiefs of Staff is important both because it displayed a much greater sense of urgency than the discussions of Ministers had shown so far, and also because, at any rate by implication, it envisaged the possibility of a more substantial rôle for the Army than that which formed the basis of current official policy.⁽²³⁾ The report was drawn up in two sections. First a critical examination of the effect of the current 'limited army' mandate on Britain's power to make best use of her resources and opportunities in war; and, second, a summary of some considerations affecting possible action on land in the first year or so of war.

In the first section the Chiefs of Staff stated explicitly that they did not challenge, indeed that they approved the main principle of overall defence production as it particularly affected the Army, i.e. the order of priority which meant meeting the demands of the Navy, the R.A.F., the Merchant Navy and the air defence of Great Britain before those of the Field Force.⁽²⁴⁾ They also explicitly denied any intention to raise the question whether, in another war, Britain ought to prepare the resources to enable her to raise and equip a large army comparable to that raised in the years 1914-18. Nor were they concerned with the question of what commitments, if any, should be entered into with allies in regard to land forces. On the other hand they argued that, both in terms of productive capacity

and in terms of manpower, more could and should be done to provide for a larger Field Force than the one currently planned. Under present arrangements four divisions and one mobile division would be put into the field, but the war potential thus created fell very short of that required to provide initial equipment and reserves and to maintain in the field a second contingent of four divisions. Although there was paper planning for production for such a second contingent, by a decision of the Cabinet as far back as July 1937, that decision had conferred no authority to spend money on acquiring the requisite machine tools, or on placing the educational orders necessary to get effective war potential in being. Nor was provision being made for the war requirements of India, the Dominions and those allies bound to Britain by treaty and equipped with material supplied by her. It might take at least a year, as Mr. Hore-Belisha and Sir Thomas Inskip had already pointed out, before the additional capacity required could produce the equipment and reserves to enable the country to put into the field, and to maintain there, any reinforcements for the field force of four divisions and one mobile division so far authorised. And yet, even with the rearmament programme supposedly in full swing, only about 30 per cent of British engineering industry was employed on armaments work. The Chiefs of Staff stated that, even allowing for the increased call on industry which would be required to meet the full needs of the war potential of the other services, they were advised that there should be ample capacity for an increased Army demand. The position was similar in terms of manpower. Despite the considerable calls on manpower which would be made by the Navy, the R.A.F., the Merchant Navy and by the Army formations for home defence, including the air defence of Great Britain, the Chiefs of Staff claimed that information supplied by the Manpower Committee led them to believe that there would still be a surplus of manpower far beyond the requirements of a Field Force of five divisions.

The point to be emphasised, it was argued, was that so long as current decisions on the rôle of the Army in war were maintained, then it would be impossible to put into the field in the first year of war any properly equipped land force substantially larger than the small force now authorised, however the situation might develop. As a result, Britain would be restricted on land to operations with a small force equipped on a scale suitable only for a second class theatre of operations. This was wrong. The country should not allow itself to remain in a position whereby, whatever the situation on the outbreak of war, it would be limited, in consequence of the policy governing preparations in peace-time, to having available during the first twelve months of war only four regular divisions and one mobile division. So limited, Britain would not be in a position

to make the best use of her available resources, or put her whole strength into the war during what might well prove to be the critical period.

The Chiefs of Staff then turned to a consideration of the problem of whether land operations would, in fact, be required in the first year of war. Possible types of operation were considered. First, the traditional ones in support of sea-power—to safeguard bases, reinforce garrisons and to secure sea communications. Such operations were now more than ever likely, and possibly more demanding, because of the need to ward off attacks on widely separated parts of the Empire. The Far East, the Mediterranean and Home Waters might all become the scene of operations, and perhaps simultaneously. In the Middle East, in particular, recent developments had raised new dangers for the Empire. Secondly, it was impossible to avoid the problem of France. The events of 1938 had brought France to depend on Great Britain more than ever and, if recent despatches were to be believed, as much on land as at sea and in the air. Help might have to be given to France on land, if only for the moral effect on the French nation as a whole. At the moment, help to allies ranked last among the Army's responsibilities.

'In this connection, however, we would point out,' wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'that if France were overrun by Germany and forced to her knees, not only would the further prosecution of the war be compromised, but we should have already failed in one of the main objects for which we entered the war, namely, the defence of France. The situation produced by the possession of the French ports by Germany would be so grave that the prevention of such a situation we consider might more truly be included under the first of the four priorities defined by the Cabinet, namely "the corner-stone on our Imperial Defence policy is to maintain the security of the United Kingdom". It is difficult to say how this security could be maintained if France were forced to capitulate and therefore the protection of the United Kingdom may have to include a share in the land defence of French Territory.

It is never possible to forecast the course which will be taken by warlike operations. We believe, however, that there will almost certainly be many demands on our land forces, some of them conflicting and some of a nature which we shall be unable to refuse, but war is a matter of seizing opportunities when they present themselves. If we do not have land forces available to take the field in the first year of war, not only may we lose the war through being unable to counter the enemy's major offensives, but we may be prevented from seizing good opportunities for offensive action overseas. Failure to take advantage of such opportunities may greatly lengthen the duration of the war.'⁽²⁵⁾

Whatever the protestations of the Chiefs of Staff that they were not challenging the basic principles of current defence policy, these arguments could certainly be interpreted as a refutation of the whole concept of 'limited liability'. At the very least they were a salutary warning from soldiers to ministers that the chances of war can never be assessed exactly, and that the side which retains the greatest ability to respond to events as they occur is the side most likely in the long run to shape events and so win the war.

The Chiefs of Staff then turned to the translation of these general principles into practical terms. They accepted the current size of the Regular Army in peace-time as something it was not practicable to alter. Equally, the size of the Territorial Army was largely governed by the number of recruits obtainable. The country was, therefore, assumed to be committed to an Army, at home, comprising four Regular Infantry divisions and one mobile division, and twelve Territorial divisions in addition to five anti-aircraft divisions.* The Chiefs of Staff then urged that the whole of the regular Field Force of four infantry divisions and one mobile division should be completely equipped for war with full reserves. The acceptance of any lesser standard would dangerously restrict the possibilities of action on land at the outbreak of war and might even lead, in certain circumstances, to the sending of a force into action without its complete equipment. Turning next to the Territorial Army they argued that some portion of it should be ready for war as soon as it could be sufficiently trained, whether to reinforce garrisons overseas, to relieve Regulars in these garrisons as happened in 1914, or to provide a reserve of trained troops for the Field Force. The limiting factor here should be the time required to train the units rather than the time required to produce their war equipment. Therefore, a contingent of four Territorial divisions should be fully equipped. This would entail striking a balance between the equipment which could be produced on the one hand during the first four months of war, in addition to that required to maintain the Regular Army in the field during the same period, and, on the other hand, the amount which should be held ready in peace. For the rest of the Territorial Army, it was recommended that they should have the full scale of equipment required on embodiment. This would ensure adequate training equipment for them, while leaving the provision of full war equipment possible but not inevitable once war began. That further stage would depend on how operations actually developed. Finally it was important to have troops, organised in proper formations, available for operations throughout the Empire without drawing on

* The Territorial Army was reorganised as from 1st December 1938, to include five A/A divisions.

the Field Force and thus impairing general readiness for war. Operations in Shanghai, Egypt and Palestine had shown how necessary such formations were. They should be equipped on a scale suitable for Imperial duties rather than for war against a first class power, but should nevertheless be provided with such items of clothing and general equipment as would enable them to proceed immediately to any part of the world.

These recommendations amounted to a full endorsement of the proposals of the Secretary of State for War as regards both the Regular Army and also the Territorial Army, with the one exception of the proposal concerning the mobile division. That was considered best left to the Secretary of State for his own recommendation.

As has already been pointed out, both Hore-Belisha and the Chiefs of Staff claimed, however doubtful the claim might seem, that they were not attempting to modify the rôle of the Army as approved by the Cabinet in its limited liability decisions of March-April 1938. On the other hand these new proposals were financially a complete reversal of much that had been decided a year before. The Secretary of State was asking for a return of the £70 million he had sacrificed then and for something more besides. Further, the arguments on which these proposals were based, whatever the protestations to the contrary, clearly implied the possibility of substantial land operations to assist France as one war-time contingency. Much could be hidden under cover of the argument that nobody wanted a repetition of the mass armies and slaughter of the First World War. To Ministers in 1937-38 that had, in practice, meant confining Britain's contribution to efforts at sea and in the air, with—so far as Continental fighting was concerned—the army of a fourth-rate Power. Now, in early 1939, the Chiefs of Staff, while still protesting in a similar way, contemplated at any rate the possibility of an army of 15-20 divisions to be sent to help France within the first year of war. The beginning of the end of the concept of 'limited liability' was in sight.

Nor were the Chiefs of Staff alone in their view. In late January 1939 the C.I.D. had under discussion a memorandum by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence on supply organisation in war.⁽²⁶⁾ This memorandum had been prepared in accordance with a directive of the C.I.D., issued in February 1938, that early in 1939 a review should be made of the progress achieved by the War Office and Air Ministry towards providing production potential for their munitions requirements for the first twelve months of war.⁽²⁷⁾ The Minister's report, in January 1939, was far from encouraging.⁽²⁸⁾ The Air Ministry was faced with a 'considerable gap' which must be bridged before reaching, in the first twelve months of an emergency, the rate of production required to meet their full war potential. Similarly,

the War Office had been able to develop war potential for only one Field Force contingent. Moreover, under existing Cabinet decisions advance arrangements could not be made to provide war potential for the whole of the land forces now in existence, much less for any expansion. Commenting on this report, Hore-Belisha said that its implications needed most careful consideration. The assumption still governing planning for supply in war was:

‘... that, so far as supply organisation is concerned, “war plans should be based on what may be termed a war of limited liability”, i.e. for example, that there will be no such expansion of the Army and consequently of military supply as occurred in the last war, or that, if such expansion does occur, the necessary supply arrangements can be left to be made after the war has begun by expanded but separate Service Supply Departments.’⁽²⁹⁾

It was now clear, argued Hore-Belisha in January 1939, that if we became involved in war it would be a struggle for our very existence and not a war in which we could limit our liability. For this reason he felt that this assumption should be referred to the Cabinet for reconsideration. Indeed, he claimed that the assumption was already undermined by one paragraph in the memorandum of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence now before the Committee which read—‘It seems clear that large measures of industrial mobilisation will or may have to be taken in emergency, and this was the supply position out of which the Ministry of Munitions originated in the last war.’⁽³⁰⁾ Hore-Belisha was strongly supported by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. The latter told the Committee that he had for a long time tried to think that a war of limited liability was possible, but that he was now convinced that such a concept must be abandoned. He was particularly worried by one aspect of the matter, i.e. the attitude of the French towards the land contribution likely to be made by Great Britain. It seemed, from the evidence at present before the Committee, that Great Britain would be incapable of making a useful contribution unless she pressed on with her preparations and increased her industrial capacity. On general principles, therefore, he thought it was right that the Government should extend industrial arrangements for the manufacture of armaments, so that larger forces could be equipped if they proved to be necessary. Such preparations would tend to hold the French steady.

The Memorandum of the Secretary of State for War and the comments on it by the Chiefs of Staff were discussed at length at a Cabinet meeting on 5th February. In introducing both papers to his colleagues Mr. Hore-Belisha emphasised that his proposals were

not intended to increase the size of the army, but only to make effective the army as it already was. But, questioned by the Prime Minister, he did agree that his proposals went beyond the decisions of 1938 to the extent both of suggesting that the Field Force be equipped to be capable of taking part in a continental war, and of proposing two colonial divisions—comprised of units outside the Field Force—equipped for general service. The main difference between the continental scale and the scale required for service elsewhere lay in the increased reserves of ammunition it entailed.

Opposition to the proposals came mainly from the Prime Minister and from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon. Both argued along the same lines. The cost of defence was continually rising and there was no obvious limit to the necessary demands being made by all three Services. Since financial strength and stability were themselves an important item in national defence, then overspending might well destroy the cause it was designed to protect. Furthermore, the expansion in the defence Services at present being undertaken was bound to lead to a greatly increased recurrent annual charge, and borrowing was inadmissible for that purpose. In addition to these arguments the Prime Minister said that the French should be led to see that the right line for the development of any Staff talks was that of how the combined resources of the two countries—France and Great Britain—could best be utilised in conjunction. If, in coming talks, it was possible to speak freely and disclose the 'whole position', then it might be hoped that when the French knew the details they would appreciate not only what a gigantic effort Britain had made but, also, that in the common interest the best course might be for Britain not to attempt to expand her land forces.⁽³¹⁾

In fairness to Mr. Chamberlain it should be remembered both that he had presided over very great increases in national expenditure on armaments and also that he showed as much anxiety about some forms of national defence—for example, air defence—as any Minister or Chief of Staff. But his was, in many respects, an inward looking mind. And he found it easy to ignore or to misunderstand the needs of others if those needs ran contrary to his own logic or predilections. Here was a case in point. Convinced of the correctness of a given policy from Britain's point of view, he was virtually incapable of understanding that the very arguments which led him to a particular conclusion were almost bound to lead the French to the opposite one. Halifax showed an altogether more flexible mind. The Foreign Secretary, as though giving a lead to some of his colleagues, questioned the wisdom of this point of view while admitting at any rate some of its logic. He was convinced that the present state of tension could not last indefinitely and must result either in war or in the destruction of the Nazi régime. In

such wholly abnormal conditions he thought it possible that unusual borrowing could be justified. The President of the Board of Trade, Mr. Oliver Stanley, took up the same theme. From one point of view the country was at war already and had been for some time past. He thought it was contrary to reality to aggregate defence expenditure over a five year period and then say that the country could not afford it. It was clear that some of the conditions of current politics could not last much longer, perhaps not for another year, and the present one was probably the crucial year. Mr. Walter Elliot, the Minister of Health, argued that whatever steps were taken as to the rôle of the Army, Britain would have to act as an arsenal in time of war. He suggested that a decision about creating an increased war potential should be taken at once.

In the end, a compromise was reached. It was decided to give general approval to the proposal that all 12 infantry divisions of the Territorial Army should be provided with a full scale of training equipment. But it was also decided to defer further discussions on all the other recommendations made by the Secretary of State for War and by the Chiefs of Staff, in order to allow time for the whole problem to be examined by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for War, and the new Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Lord Chatfield, as soon as the latter had taken up his duties.⁽³²⁾ The Prime Minister and Sir John Simon had, so far, fought a fairly successful rearguard action.

The deferred proposals were then the subject of discussion at two meetings presided over by Mr. Chamberlain and attended by a small group of Ministers including Sir John Simon, Mr. Hore-Belisha and Lord Chatfield. By mid-February 1939 their report was made to the Cabinet. It represented a typical compromise with some small and not easily understandable economies combined with an acceptance of a substantial part of what Hore-Belisha and the Chiefs of Staff had earlier suggested.⁽³³⁾ The Committee's recommendations were then accepted by the Cabinet. The infantry divisions of the Field Force were to be provided with full equipment and reserves for men on a continental scale at an estimated additional cost of about £22,500,000. These divisions were to go abroad with two mobile divisions formed out of the existing one.* It was also agreed to provide war equipment and reserves for four Territorial

* The matter of the mobile division was treated as a technical one and gave rise to little discussion. It is interesting to note that for the past 18 months at least Captain Liddell Hart, now *The Times* Military Correspondent and also unofficial adviser to Mr. Hore-Belisha, had been urging the Government to offer the French two mechanised divisions instead of the Field Force infantry divisions, on the ground that the latter would add comparatively little to French strength, while the former would provide an invaluable quantitative reinforcement. It is not possible from the Cabinet and C.I.D. papers to know whether and how much this argument had impressed Ministers or influenced their decisions.

infantry divisions at a further cost of about £26 million. Savings, amounting to about £5 million, were effected by postponing the estimated dates of embarkation for both the second echelon of the Field Force and the four divisions of the Territorial Army, subject to further reconsideration of this matter by the Chiefs of Staff and during forthcoming Staff talks with the French. A larger saving was to be made, at any rate temporarily, by postponing forming two colonial divisions out of existing non-Field Force units. This question was to be deferred until some further decisions had been taken on the overall problem of the defence of India.

More important than the detailed decisions were the reasons for them. The Prime Minister told the Cabinet that he accepted these proposals with reluctance, but that he saw no alternative. Hitherto the concept had been of an army available for service in any part of the world, but not specially equipped for Continental warfare; the Cabinet had not, in fact, been asked to agree to a commitment that any divisions of the Field Force would be sent to the Continent. The situation, however, had been changed by the events of the previous autumn. France now had to face the possibility of meeting a far stronger German force, and there was also a feeling in France that Great Britain would not be playing an adequate part in a common war unless she made some contribution on land. It was therefore necessary to give up the concept of one army available for service anywhere, and to envisage one army equipped for service on the Continent and a second army equipped for service in the Colonies or elsewhere overseas. Not only did this involve a higher scale of equipment and reserves for the forces to be despatched to the Continent, but steps must be taken to ensure that the first echelon could be despatched as quickly as possible.* Turning to provision for the Territorial Army the Prime Minister warned his colleagues that unless the present proposals were accepted, then it would be impossible for any of these divisions (other than the A/A divisions) to engage in hostilities until a year after the outbreak of war. He was not asking the Cabinet to commit itself to sending the Territorial Army overseas on the outbreak of war;† but he did think the Government ought to be in a position to send some part of it overseas in less than a year if it so desired. Moreover, he added, he thought that public opinion would become restive if the present position became widely known. Finally, the Prime Minister made clear that present plans were provisional and would provide a starting point for Staff talks with the French; if the French, however,

* i.e. within 21 days at most. But some saving was to be made by planning on the basis that the second echelon would not be needed for embarkation until D+60.

† At this stage the Government were proposing to enter into a definite commitment to send the Field Force abroad on the outbreak of war.

pressed strongly for some alteration in this provisional plan, then the matter could of course be reconsidered. These views, certainly on their positive side, were strongly supported by Lord Chatfield, the new Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. Like the Prime Minister, he stressed that a new concept of the Army's rôle was now being proposed and that it should represent a good basis for discussion with the French of the combined war plans for the two countries. The only note of disagreement was voiced by those—and two Ministers certainly took this line—who argued that the extra expenditure now being suggested should have been devoted, instead, to the extension of the air defence of Great Britain.⁽³⁴⁾

Not the least interesting feature of these developments is the new part played by Mr. Hore-Belisha himself. Having begun at the War Office by fully accepting the Prime Minister's point of view concerning the Army he had now, by the spring of 1939, come full circle to a position in which he had taken up the Army's case where Mr. Duff Cooper left it. The reasons which led Mr. Hore-Belisha to make this change are not so easy to detect. Certainly the official documents throw no light on the matter.⁽³⁵⁾

It so happened that during the time when the Cabinet was making these important changes in its plans for the rôle of the Army the Chiefs of Staff were preparing a major European Appreciation for 1939-40. The basis of that appreciation was the strategic situation which would exist should Great Britain find herself, in alliance with France, ranged against Germany and Italy, with the possibility of Japan intervening also.⁽³⁶⁾ The Chiefs of Staff, it should be remembered, were writing on the assumption of war in the spring of 1939, therefore at a time when the Cabinet's current decisions about the Army could not have been translated into fact. In that case only a small expeditionary force of two divisions was counted on in the period Z+1 month, and that was all the help on land which the French could expect from us. Moreover, the divisions were bound, in April 1939 and for some time afterwards, to be inadequately equipped and unsupported by reserves; a third division could, on current reckoning, probably be produced in about Z+3 months, but not sooner.⁽³⁷⁾ Nevertheless, the Chiefs of Staff argued that the moral aspect of the early assistance of the British Empire on land would be out of all proportion to the size of the force despatched. France, faced with a combination of Germany and Italy, might well give up the unequal struggle unless supported with the assurance that Britain would assist her to the utmost. As though made nervous by their own temerity, the Chiefs of Staff hastened to add that 'the final decision, of course, could only be taken by His Majesty's Government in the light of the circumstances existing at the time, and having regard to the possible requirements for British troops in

other theatres'.* Ministers, however, were not so cautious. The Appreciation, as we have seen,† was referred to the S.A.C.⁽³⁸⁾ When making its recommendations on this particular part of the Appreciation, the committee commented that it thought the qualification introduced by the Chiefs of Staff left the whole position too indefinite.⁽³⁹⁾‡ 'We recommend', they wrote, 'that in the event of a German land attack on France or Belgium, the despatch of the regular contingents of the Field Force at certain specified dates after we had entered a war in alliance with the French, should be accepted as a primary commitment'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This recommendation, with others made by the committee, was then endorsed without question by the C.I.D.⁽⁴¹⁾

The rôle of the Army in a future major war did not again come up to the Cabinet as a specific issue before the outbreak of war. What happened was that, in the process of Staff talks with the French, and under the impetus of the deterioration in political events in the spring of 1939, the emphasis on providing help on land to support France in a war against Germany became steadily stronger. In the process the concept of the Army's rôle changed out of all recognition from what had been agreed upon during the winter of 1937-38. Some of these matters will be examined in more detail later.§ Here only the broad outline of developments is important.

As we have already seen, the Prime Minister, in suggesting particular embarkation dates for the Field Force, had admitted that these arrangements were only provisional and put forward simply as a basis for discussion with the French. 'If, however, the French representatives pressed strongly for some alteration in this provisional plan, the matter could of course, be reconsidered'.⁽⁴²⁾ The French did, in fact, press strongly for some alteration. The British delegation to the Staff talks with the French went, so far as the Army was concerned, with specific instructions about the forces likely to be available and when.

'We could send the first echelon of the Field Force, the two Regular Divisions in "Z" plus twenty-one days after the outbreak of war. The second echelon, namely, two further Regular Divisions, could be despatched by "Z" plus 4 months. One Regular Armoured Division will become available about the middle of 1940, the second would not be available till a later date. As regards the Territorial Army, if war broke out at the end of 1939, all thirteen divisions should be ready within one year. If, however, the outbreak of war were deferred until July 1940, or

* See also below, p. 663.

† See note, p. 423 above.

‡ See above, p. 513.

§ See Chapters XVI and XVII.

later, four Divisions would become available six months afterwards and the remaining nine within one year.⁽⁴³⁾

There were some further conditions. It was to be made clear to the French Delegation that the commitment to send a Field Force related only to Regular divisions; no commitment could be made in advance about the use of the Territorial Army. This did not, of course, preclude discussions as to what would be the best use of the Territorial Army divisions from the military point of view. It was emphasised, however, that the Territorial Army would be used in the best interests of the Allied cause, and the final decision, as to where the Territorial Army should be employed, once war had begun, would doubtless only be taken after consultation with the French Government. At the talks the French delegates recognised that this last was a political matter. On the general size and times of arrival of the British forces, however, the French representatives pointed out that the French Army would have to carry a heavy burden while the British divisions were assembling, and said that they regarded the present programme with the 'greatest anxiety'. They were, indeed, emphatic that they felt very strongly on the subject.⁽⁴⁴⁾

On their return home the British representatives made it clear that this programme required further investigation.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The Cabinet then filled out their plans for greatly increasing military manpower by doubling the Territorial Army and by introducing conscription.* They dealt with the matter again in mid-April 1939.⁽⁴⁶⁾ As a result, an entirely new programme was put to the French representatives when the second stage of the Staff talks began in the fourth week of that month.

The new programme was as follows:

- (a) To send the Regular Army as soon as possible after the outbreak of war, namely in the first six weeks.
- (b) The first ten Territorial Divisions to be available for service when required in the fourth, fifth and sixth months.
- (c) The last sixteen Territorial Divisions to be similarly ready in the ninth to twelfth months.

It was made clear that the earliest date by which this aim could be completely accomplished was not for some eighteen months from the date of announcement. And, as before, no prior commitment would be made about the destination of any of the Territorial Army Divisions.⁽⁴⁷⁾

* See below, Section 3.

Shortly before the second stage of the Staff talks began General Gamelin wrote to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Gort, urging—from the French point of view—an altogether more forthcoming attitude on the part of the British Government regarding the times of the despatch of the Field Force and its reinforcements. An offensive on the western front must be expected, he argued, whether or not Poland, Roumania and perhaps Yugoslavia chose to co-operate against Germany.

'France', he wrote 'would thus have to withstand single-handed the onslaught of the Central Powers. It would be in their interest to make this onslaught as violent as possible, since they must fear a long war.

The French Army will certainly be able to bar the invaders' advance, but in order to do so it will have to engage the whole of its forces from the outset. To maintain a sustained effort it must have reserves to provide for the rapid relief of the units engaged on the northern part of its front. It is necessary, therefore, that powerful British forces should be in a position to act rapidly on the Continent.

It should also be noted that, if this possible action by your Army were announced in peace-time to Belgium, she might be strengthened in her desire to seek means of resisting the invader.'⁽⁴⁸⁾

The new programme announced at the second stage of the Staff talks was, naturally, greeted by General Gamelin with pleasure and approval, and it remained the basis of talks with the French, so far as the Army was concerned, until the outbreak of war. And it should be remembered that, throughout the talks, the British Government had accepted as 'a primary commitment' the despatch of the Field Force to the Continent in the event of a German land attack on France or Belgium.^{(49)*}

3. *The Territorial Army Doubled and Conscription, Spring 1939*

It will have been realised that the final programme for co-operation with France just described implied a very much larger army than that comprised by the original Regular and Territorial

* It is worth noting, however, that these promises continued to be affected by the overall supply position. Deficiencies of the Field Force were reviewed in July 1939. It was then revealed that for the Regular Infantry Divisions of that force, there were available only 72 out of 240 heavy A/A guns with only 30 per cent of the approved scale of ammunition; only 108 out of 226 light A/A guns and 144 out of 240 anti-tank guns. The A/A guns shortage would almost certainly remain for some time unless improved at the expense of A.D.G.B., itself already short. Moreover, the field artillery units would have no 25-pdr. guns. Finally, at the risk of some delay in the embarkation of the Regular contingent, A.D.G.B. had been given priority for lorries and some other vehicles.⁽⁵⁰⁾

divisions. In fact while the Staff talks were in their critical early stages some important decisions had been made in London which affected the overall size of Britain's armed forces and that of the Army in particular.

The political events of the spring of 1939 produced a remarkable change in the Government's attitude towards national defence, an altogether more urgent approach than had been evident at the time of the Munich Agreement. On 14th March 1939 German troops crossed the frontier of the truncated Czechoslovakia, created at Munich, and the absorption of the rump of the country into the German orbit began. On 31st March Chamberlain told the House of Commons that, if Poland's independence were threatened in such a way that the Poles felt bound to resist by force, then 'His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power'.⁽⁵¹⁾ On 7th April, Good Friday, Italian forces seized Albania. And that action led to an extension to Greece and Roumania of the pledge already made to Poland.* But clearly, pledges and the fears which produced them would not be honoured or removed without an answer to the military threat which had brought them into being.

The changes in Britain's military preparations chiefly occasioned by these events fall into two parts. The Czech crisis led to considerable anxiety in the Cabinet about the state of the country's defences. At a Cabinet meeting on 22nd March the Prime Minister told his colleagues that air defence ground organisation (i.e. A/A guns and searchlights) had been based on the assumption that there would be at least 12 hours' warning. If there was sudden enemy action without warning, the country could be totally devoid of ground defences against air attack. Further, while the organisation of the Territorial A/A divisions was designed to secure a rapid deployment of the whole force, it was very difficult to deploy only a part of it and, once the force had been deployed and then allowed to disperse, a considerable period must elapse before it could be rapidly deployed again. There was a need to ensure greater readiness to meet a sudden attack and to improve the machinery for deployment. Manpower constantly available was clearly the key to an answer, but was not a practical possibility without conscription. The Prime Minister said he thought the Labour Party would oppose conscription; Lord Chatfield said he doubted whether the Chiefs of Staff had so far considered such a solution.⁽⁵²⁾

A week later the subject of national service came up again for discussion in Cabinet. This was now described by the Prime Minister as 'a matter of great urgency'. He said that he had much sympathy

* See below, Chapter XVIII.

with the proposal for compulsory military service, both for what it could do for Britain's defences and because of its likely impression on foreign opinion. He admitted that he, like Mr. Baldwin, had given a pledge not to introduce compulsory military service during the life of the present Parliament, but he doubted whether present conditions justified him in regarding that as still a binding pledge. What really influenced him, he claimed, was the probable attitude of the Labour Party and of the Trade Union movement. Labour was at present being extremely helpful in turning a blind eye to a number of factors to which objection would normally be raised. Conscription might ruin this co-operation and a difference of opinion create a bad impression abroad. He had therefore asked the Secretary of State for War to examine and submit alternative proposals for compulsory military service and for a scheme designed to secure a large increase in the Territorial Army.

Hore-Belisha then outlined his proposals for the Territorial Army. He proposed to raise the peace-time strength of the Territorial Field Divisions, 130,000 men, to the war strength of 170,000 and then to double the Territorial Army to a grand total of 340,000 men. The method followed would be to over-recruit in every unit, so as to form a cadre from which a duplicate unit could be built. There would be difficulties about premises, equipment and instructors, and the whole scheme would eventually cost £80 to £100 million. He also asked the Cabinet to agree to a further move to raise the strength of the Regular Army by 50,000 men. After discussion, in which no serious objection was raised to these proposals, it was agreed that the terms of an announcement, to be made that afternoon, 29th March, to the House of Lords and the House of Commons should be settled by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for War.⁽⁵³⁾

There do not seem to have been any preparations within the War Office for this decision, and from the start Mr. Hore-Belisha warned his Cabinet colleagues that there would be administrative difficulties in carrying it out. The main difficulty was lack of equipment. There was so little available to cope with the influx of volunteers that, in May, a General Staff co-ordinating Committee advised that there should be a stop in further T.A. recruiting for the time being. Further difficulties were created by the introduction of conscription. If there were—as in a sense there were—too many Territorials, then it would make matters even worse to try to place in the Territorial Army the early batches of militia when their training was completed. In this matter the General Staff was overridden by the Secretary of State and could, therefore, only fall back on some weeding of those who, in any case, would not be available in war because of the operation of the Schedule of Reserved Occupations.⁽⁵⁴⁾

In April 1939, following Italian action against Albania, the subject of manpower came up once more for Cabinet consideration. Hore-Belisha's proposal for doubling the Territorial Army, while promising a very much larger reserve army in due course, did not satisfy the immediate need to have men already trained and mobilised, or ready for mobilisation. The Foreign Secretary now, in April, told his colleagues that reports had been received from H.M. Ambassador in Rome telling of the calling up of Italian reserves and reporting rumours of German troops passing through Italy. The Secretary of State for War said that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was strongly in favour of some immediate increase of mobilisation for the Army and he himself thought such a step should be carefully considered. If Territorials were asked, for example, to maintain a 24-hour duty on guns and searchlights, by means of some voluntary system and without a proclamation declaring an emergency, serious anomalies and hardships would result and the solution would not be an effective one. Mr. Hore-Belisha went on to say he thought that an attempt to get the necessary men for full-time duties by voluntary methods would fail, and that the only satisfactory method of providing a permanent nucleus for the defences against air attack was to man that nucleus with Regulars. His proposal, was, therefore, first, to declare an emergency and call out the A/A units of the Territorial Army to man the defences during the next few months; second, to create a Regular force by calling out Reservists, who could be trained to man the guns and searchlights in three months time. That, however, was only a temporary arrangement, and he saw no means of obtaining the number of additional Regulars required for a permanent arrangement except by some system of compulsory service.

At this point Ministers were not clear or united in their views. Lord Chatfield, for example, thought that compulsory service simply to provide a constant and efficient system of A/A defence would be like taking a sledge hammer to crack a nut. Further the Navy and Air Force were not so hard pressed for men as was the Army. The matter was, therefore, postponed for further exploration and discussion.⁽⁵⁵⁾

On 24th April the Cabinet considered in detail a memorandum outlining the reasons for some exceptional measures at this stage and also indicating the lines upon which legislation to bring about compulsory military training might be drawn up. It was made clear that the proposals contained in the memorandum were intended to be both an earnest of determination to resist aggression and also a method of providing a solution for urgent problems of defence preparedness during prolonged periods of uncertainty and tension. Mr. Chamberlain stressed the disadvantageous position in which any

British Government was placed by not being able to take measures essential to national safety without an amount of publicity calculated to create alarm. Broadly speaking, the existing position was that, except for a few small and relatively unimportant classes, it was impossible to mobilise any of the reserve or auxiliary forces without declaring a state of emergency. Continental countries, on the other hand, were in a position to carry out partial or selective measures of mobilisation by calling up particular classes or groups of reservists. And in recent weeks many Continental countries had done that. In fact, it now appeared that Britain, alone of the Powers likely to be involved in hostilities at the outset of war, had taken no corresponding preparatory steps. There was a natural reluctance to declare a state of emergency in this country, since this step was usually taken only when a war appeared to be imminent as the result of tension or some particular episode, and then only at the very last moment for fear lest such a declaration should wreck the chances of a settlement. It was, therefore, necessary to devise some method of carrying out not a general mobilisation but only such partial measures as might be necessary from time to time to advance the degree of national preparedness. Such measures could later be increased or decreased in the light of the circumstances without any further powers from Parliament.

One other theme ran prominently through these discussions. That was the fear that Labour opinion generally, and the Trade Unions in particular, would be opposed, perhaps bitterly opposed, to conscription. Quite apart from any other safeguards against this such as prior consultation with Labour representatives and statements about measures to prevent war-time profiteering, it was therefore decided to sugar the pill in two ways. First, any scheme for compulsory military training was to be clearly linked to the other exceptional powers expressly authorised by Parliament and would be limited in duration to the period during which those exceptional powers continued in force. Second, no new plan for conscription would entirely supersede existing traditional methods of voluntary service. The voluntary principle would continue in force for recruiting for the Navy, the Royal Air Force, the Regular Army, the Territorial Army, and other auxiliary forces, the various Civil Defence forces and other forms of National Service. All that the new plan aimed to provide was a special supplementation of those methods, more particularly for the Air Defence of Great Britain, and confined to Home Defence unless and until war broke out.⁽⁵⁶⁾

The Cabinet's discussions on Monday, 24th April, revealed differences of opinion not so much on issues of principle as on the practical difficulties of implementing a decision to introduce National Service. A further small meeting of Ministers was therefore held

that evening, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, and another full Cabinet on Tuesday, 25th, to consider these practical difficulties further. It was now decided to introduce two Bills, the first dealing with the mobilisation of reserve and auxiliary forces and the second with compulsory military training. The most important immediate effect of the first bill would be to make possible the calling out of a proportion of the Territorial anti-aircraft units so that some of the defences would be constantly manned during the present period of tension; later these Territorial units would be relieved by men called up under the Military Training Bill. The broad purpose of the latter Bill was to enable all British male subjects, within a single year's age group, to be called up for military training. If the 1919 age group, i.e. those now 20 years of age, were called up, then something like 250,000 men would be available; of that total the War Office wanted 80,000 called up in batches and trained for service in the Air Defence of Great Britain, the remainder to be attached to Field Army Units. The period of military training included in this particular Bill was to be six months. Finally, each Bill was to contain a provision that it would continue in force for three years, except that at any time His Majesty could, by Order in Council, declare that the necessity for the measure had ceased to exist and, second, that after the termination of three years either might be continued from year to year by means of an affirmative resolution of both Houses of Parliament. An announcement of the Government's intentions was then to be made in both Houses of Parliament on Wednesday, 26th April.^{(57)*}

One further Army development in these months deserves separate consideration. Early in 1939 both Mr. Hore-Belisha and the Chiefs of Staff had emphasised the need to build up a reserve in the Middle East.⁽⁵⁸⁾ In the relevant part of their big European Appreciation 1939-40, completed in February 1939, the Chiefs of Staff returned to the same theme.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Because of the local military situation in the Arab countries, and the risk of attack on reinforcements moving through the Mediterranean and Red Seas in time of war the Chiefs of Staff argued . . .

‘that we ought to maintain in peace in the Middle East sufficient troops to enable us to protect ourselves against a considerable degree of disaffection . . . among the Arabs while at the same time meeting the maximum possible scale of land attack from Libya.’^{(60)†}

* It follows, from what has been noted above (p. 518), that there was at this stage no appreciation of the difficulties likely to arise from the relationship of the militia (conscripts) and the recently doubled Territorial Army.

† The same point was made in the Middle East Appreciation of 1938, see above, pp. 485-86.

The Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Cyril Newall, emphasised this particular point when presenting the Appreciation to the C.I.D. A policy of self-sufficiency for our forces and defences in the Middle East was, he argued, all the more desirable because, if a fleet had to be despatched to the Far East then, on the assumption that our forces in the Middle East had not been previously strengthened, it would become all the more difficult to get the necessary reinforcements through to them.⁽⁶¹⁾

This recommendation, with the rest of the Appreciation, was then referred by the C.I.D. to the S.A.C. The latter, in its report stated that:

'... it is clear that the Chiefs of Staff take the view that the present scale of our defences in Egypt and the Middle East is such as to cause us considerable anxiety, having regard to the difficulties, dangers and time-lag if we have to send major reinforcements to this area by sea in time of war. In consequence the Chiefs of Staff have recommended a policy of "self-sufficiency" in Egypt and the Middle East. We endorse this view and place first in priority, therefore, the recommendations . . . dealing with the defences of Egypt and the Middle East.'⁽⁶²⁾

The S.A.C. and subsequently the full C.I.D. therefore accepted the recommendation of the Chiefs of Staff that the Middle East reserve should be increased from one infantry brigade to a colonial division, at an initial cost of £5 million and at an annual cost of £1 million subsequently. On the same occasion the C.I.D. also gave its 'approval to the principle that reserves of stores, supplies and petrol for 90 days should be maintained in the Middle East for the approved garrisons and initial reinforcements, but that the precise scale of reserves for each item, the arrangements for storage in each case and the financial implications involved should be the subject of further discussion between the Treasury and the Departments concerned.'⁽⁶³⁾

When Mr. Hore-Belisha had raised the issue of colonial divisions early in 1939 he had, in fact asked for two such divisions⁽⁶⁴⁾ at a total cost of approximately £11 million. At that time a decision had been postponed. In late April and after the Chiefs of Staff had recommended raising the Middle East reserve from a brigade to a division, the Secretary of State for War put forward his earlier suggestion once again.⁽⁶⁵⁾ His original proposal had been based not so much on the need for a Middle East reserve—indeed he took that need for granted—as on the fact that troops currently engaged in operations in Palestine were using equipment borrowed from the Field Force, since no general authority existed to equip any divisions

outside the Force. This situation could be remedied by the formal establishment of the proposed colonial divisions. Now in April, he put his case on broader grounds. His intention, as before, was to have a second colonial division located in England. It was designed, he said, to relieve the Field Force of calls for overseas reinforcements both in peace and, to some extent, in war. Unless the formation of the second division was approved then the outbreak of war might well find the Army, as it would at present, with important elements of one or more divisions of the Field Force engaged overseas in imperial policing. Further, if the whole of the regular Field Force was needed on the Continent when war broke out, then, unless this second colonial division was formed, there would be no formations in the United Kingdom ready for despatch to any other theatre before Territorial divisions became available. Moreover, since the Government of India had now agreed to release the units required for the formation of these two divisions there was no longer any need—as had been argued previously—to wait for the views of the Chatfield Report on this matter.*

Explaining the proposal to the C.I.D., Lord Chatfield told the Committee that in the current Staff talks the French had expressed anxiety regarding Britain's defence position in the Middle East, and that they were particularly hopeful that she would be able, by action from Egypt, to contain as many Italian forces as possible on that front, thus improving the chances of a successful French offensive from Tunisia. In relation to the present proposal he explained that a number of the units now in Palestine would be coming home, particularly when units released from India were available to proceed to Palestine. From the former units it would be possible to form the second colonial division, but no authority existed for the provision of the necessary war reserves. There were, at present, fourteen battalions in Palestine, more than enough to form two colonial divisions, each of which would have six battalions. The argument, in other words, for the formation and equipping of a second colonial division at home was that, if not formed and equipped with war reserves, it might be called upon to act by means of borrowing from the Field Force, thus interfering with the efficiency of the latter should a major war break out. In the end it was decided, however, that since £134 million had recently been approved for equipping thirty-two divisions, equipment for the second colonial division could, if the need should arise, be taken from supplies coming forward for those divisions without actually impairing the efficiency of the Field Force. The C.I.D. therefore agreed to approve in principle the formation of a second colonial division but that no

* For the Chatfield Report, see Appendix II.

specific appropriations should be made for its war equipment and war reserves.⁽⁶⁶⁾ These plans for the organisation and rôle of the Army remained, except for some minor changes, until the outbreak of war.

While it makes an interesting speculation to debate whether the R.A.F. was worse, as well, or better prepared for war against Germany in September 1939 than in September 1938, there is little point in any such speculation concerning the Army. The answer is beyond dispute. Britain had no Army at the time of Munich capable of contributing to a continental campaign against a major enemy, and that was not by accident. What is interesting is to ask whether the first nine months of the war that actually occurred might have been different had the decision to accept a continental commitment been made not in 1939 but as far back as the first D.R.C. Report and then firmly kept. It was not necessary to think only in terms of a large conscript army to implement such a decision. A small Regular Army, planned on an élite basis, might just possibly have proved decisive even in May or June, 1940, provided training, equipment and tactical doctrine had been consistently designed with such a campaign in mind.* What hesitation, doubt, and then the decision against a continental commitment did was to inhibit that thinking and innovation which any army needs when it faces a new war. This problem is well illustrated by the history of the development of armoured fighting vehicles. The General Staff were well aware of the problems of designing 'common purpose' tanks and those with more specific rôles. By later 1936 the only type available in numbers was the light tank which was relevant to the colonial or eastern theatre hypotheses. In succeeding years the War Office knew of developments in both France and Germany, developments increasingly relevant to Britain's needs as pressure to accept a continental commitment first increased and was then accepted. Indeed, as early as October 1936, the War Office had drawn up a detailed statement of possible types of tank for the British Army, ranging from light tanks for mechanised cavalry, through medium to heavy infantry assault tanks. But throughout 1937 and 1938 little was done to develop new types because thinking was inhibited by lack of clear directives or, where such directives existed, because they tended to exclude the very kind of war, planning for which would have inspired new developments. This was made clear by the

* The late Sir Basil Liddell Hart talked on these lines with the author on several occasions claiming that this was the policy he urged on Hore-Belisha and others. His argument was that an armoured force of two or three divisions, together with suitably trained infantry and with tactical air co-operation, would have provided the force needed to cut off the German armoured breakthrough west of the Ardennes in 1940. What is surely clear is that no such force could have existed without a long-term commitment to a continental campaign, and Liddell Hart's influence was, on the whole, against that.

Director General of Munitions Production in January 1939, when he remarked that:

'The difficulty about the tank has really been . . . to make up our minds exactly what we want . . . The type of tank you want depends very largely on the theatre of war in which it is expected to be used. . . . Directly you begin to consider a war on a Western basis your tanks become a different business altogether from a war in Egypt.'⁽⁶⁷⁾

No doubt the soldiers were to blame for some of their own doubts and hesitations—but certainly not for all of them.

The equipment problems faced by the Army at the outbreak of war can be illustrated in detail from bi-monthly progress reports made by the War Office to the C.I.D.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Shortages in armoured fighting vehicles and guns are the most impressive. So far as A.F.V.'s were concerned supply was best in the cases of light tanks (suitable for reconnaissance but not for tank battles) and machine gun carriers. In December 1938 the estimated requirement for light tanks was about 1,300, of which 700 were expected by the end of March 1939. The comparable figures for carriers were 1,700 and 850. In both cases design was already agreed upon and production rate was relatively satisfactory. The increase in Army requirements consequent upon the changes of the spring of 1939 made little difference to light tanks but roughly trebled the need for carriers. Estimated deliveries of light tanks now stood at 1,050 by the end of September 1939, but, of a total demand for 5,000 carriers, only 2,000 were expected by that date.

The situation was much more serious so far as heavier tanks were concerned. In December 1938 over 600 medium and about 370 infantry tanks were planned for with only 30 of the first and 60 of the second expected by the end of March 1939. It was then noted, moreover, that further orders must await trials of pilot models made to a new design. By June of 1939 the need had risen to about 1,100 for each type, i.e. medium and infantry, with only 125 medium tanks and 115 infantry tanks expected by the end of the following September. The one ray of sunshine was that designs appear at last to have been agreed upon and substantial orders placed.

The overall picture was no better in the supply of guns, particularly in new types. In the War Office progress report for December 1938 it was pointed out that 380 of the new 25-pdr guns were needed, but none were expected by the end of March 1939. By June 1939 the need had increased to 1,770 and still only 140 were expected by the following September. Supplies of the new 2-pdr tank and anti-tank guns were better; by June, 1939, about 3,000 were needed and over 1,000 expected by the autumn. A further problem was that of gun

carriages. The design of the carriage for the new 25-pdr gun had not been settled until the end of 1938 and arrangements for its production had then still to be made.

There were problems, also, about the supply of A/A guns. In the late autumn of 1938, and as a result of obvious shortages at the time of the Munich crisis, Treasury approval was given for the purchase of additional 3·7-inch guns and 40 mm. Bofors light guns. By June 1939 the total Army requirement was estimated at about 1,300 3·7-inch guns of which only 30 were likely to be delivered by the end of September. For the light Bofors gun the comparable figures were 2,250 and 300.

Finally, behind the shortfall in actual and estimated deliveries of weapons lay the basic problem of inadequate production capacity due to earlier indecision and to plans for a small, general purposes Army. When more Bofors guns were authorised in the autumn of 1938 not only had new production capacity to be sought in this country, guns had also to be ordered from Poland, Belgium and Hungary and further enquiries were made in Czechoslovakia. In the final pre-war progress report from the War Office, in June 1939, talk of the need for extra capacity which would only now be planned, and of factories for the purpose which could only now be built, let alone brought into production, is repeated time and again. Tanks, small arms, cordite, gauges and fuses, all figure in the list of items in short supply due to uncompleted or still-to-be-planned production capacity. The Deficiency programmes, even, would not have been completed by the outbreak of war; the vastly expanded programmes arising from the new Army planned in the spring of 1939 were bound greatly to lengthen the delay.

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PART III

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE: THE FRAMEWORK OF EXPANSION, 1936-39

Introductory Note

THE EXPANSION of the Royal Air Force in the nineteen-thirties was not complicated by a strategic debate comparable to those already outlined for the two sister Services. Unlike the Army, the R.A.F. was, from the beginning, designed to protect Britain against the near menace of a continental enemy and its main purpose remained the same down to the outbreak of war and throughout its duration. Like the Navy, the R.A.F. had a problem of world-wide deployment based on resources insufficient for that purpose; but unlike the Navy, it had an answer so clear and unequivocal that the problem itself might never have existed. Germany was not only the near, but also by far the greatest, air menace to Britain's security. There was, of course, a need for aircraft in the Mediterranean theatre and in the Far East. But that need never seriously competed with the demands of the Metropolitan Air Force. For example, shortly after the Munich crisis the Chiefs of Staff prepared an appreciation on 'The Situation in the Event of War Against Germany'. In that paper it was made clear that—

'All our available Metropolitan air strength must be devoted to operations against Germany with the primary aim of the defence of the United Kingdom. No air reinforcements will, therefore, be available for Imperial defence overseas, and this would leave our defence against Italian air attack on Egypt very weak.'⁽¹⁾

This was, of course, an unusually difficult period, with new types of aircraft only just coming into squadron service. But, and allowing for variations of emphasis in changing circumstances, the priority of home defence remained uncontested.

There were many debatable matters connected with the expansion of the R.A.F. and these will be examined in the context of the actual expansion programmes. The present chapter will deal with some of the general conditions and ideas which formed the background to the period of expansion as a whole.

1. *The Priority of Air Rearmament*

Whatever the changes in rearmament policy between 1933 and 1939 one factor remained constant, namely the priority given to plans for the expansion of the Royal Air Force. The whole basis of the first Deficiency programme proposed by the D.R.C. early in 1934 was subsequently changed by Ministers in order to provide more money for the Air Force and less for the Army and Navy.* Later, two further independent Air Force increases were made before the second comprehensive deficiency programme, affecting all three Services, was agreed to.† And as late as July 1938 the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence advised his colleagues that they should be content with something less than a 'new standard' Navy—whatever the risks implied in that decision—because of the existing demands on available reserves and 'in particular . . . the increased demands likely to be made by the Air [Force], which at the present time is of the utmost importance'.‡ The Cabinet subsequently accepted the Minister's advice.§ This is certainly not to suggest that, throughout the period under consideration, the Air Staff obtained all the money and other resources which they considered necessary for an adequate and balanced expansion of the R.A.F. Nevertheless, 'the R.A.F. was probably the first to overcome the purely financial limits to its expansion, and its rate of growth was higher than that of the other Services';¶ moreover, the R.A.F. was also first among the Services to break out of traditional peace-time restraints on production, the traditional 'business as usual', and 'to enter into what to all intents and purposes were war-time conditions of supply'.(5)§

* See above, Chapter IV.

† See above, Chapter V, pp. 175-77.

‡ See above, pp. 353-54.

§ See also above, pp. 314-15. The argument put forward here can be demonstrated by comparing the sums spent on the individual Services between 1933 and 1939.

Table 14

Comparison of Annual Expenditure on the Three Services, 1933-39

| <i>Financial</i> ⁽⁶⁾ <i>Year</i> | <i>Army</i> | <i>Navy</i> | <i>Air Force</i> |
|--|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1933 | 37,592,000 | 53,500,000 | 16,780,000 |
| 1934 | 39,660,000 | 56,580,000 | 17,630,000 |
| 1935 | 44,647,000 | 64,806,000 | 27,496,000 |
| 1936 | 54,846,000 | 81,092,000 | 50,134,000 |
| 1937 | 63,010,000 | 77,950,000 | 56,290,000 |
| | 14,867,000(†) | 24,000,000(†) | 26,000,000(†) |
| 1938 | 86,661,000 | 95,945,000 | 72,800,000 |
| | 35,700,000(†) | 31,350,000(†) | 61,000,000(†) |
| 1939 | 88,296,928 | 97,960,312 | 105,702,490 |

(†) Issues under the Defence Loans Act, 1937. (For an estimate of annual totals as percentages of national income see Ursula (Lady) Hicks, *British Public Finances: Their Structures and Development* (Oxford, 1954) p. 14.)

In some comments on these chapters Lord Swinton wrote as follows to the author. 'I had no difficulty as Air Minister on Finance, because Sir Edward Bridges came and sat with us at the Air Ministry and approved all our expenditure.'

There were two reasons, at the grand strategy level, for this priority accorded to the expansion of the R.A.F. The first was the assumption that, in the event of a war between Britain and Germany, this country would find its air force the most immediately effective weapon of defence and attack. It was taken for granted that Germany's chances of final victory in a long war were small and that Hitler himself also took this view; it was, therefore, expected that Germany would make an all-out effort during the initial stages and that it would be necessary to be prepared to resist a major attack then. So far as Britain was concerned, the only possible form of direct attack against her was from the air against London, other ports and industrial centres, and against shipping in home waters.

'It is generally recognised', the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence stated in 1937, 'that . . . the greatest danger against which we have to provide is attack from the air on the United Kingdom, designed to inflict a knock-out blow at the initial stage of a war. It follows that the Air Force takes a place second to none in our defensive preparations.'⁽⁷⁾

Mr. Chamberlain repeated this same argument in April 1938, at a meeting of Heads of State preceding the Anglo-French Staff talks of that year.⁽⁸⁾

There was also the complementary argument, as Mr. Chamberlain pointed out on that same occasion that, during the initial period of fighting, the air offered Britain her only opportunity of direct retaliation against Germany. While fighter aircraft and A/A defences were needed to locate and destroy the enemy's striking force, bombers were needed to strike back at the enemy and reduce the scale of attack at its source. In an early appreciation of plans for war against Germany the Chiefs of Staff stressed the view that, apart from measures of defence against air attack, 'the offensive employment of our own and allied bombers is the only other measure which could affect the issue during the first few weeks of the war, since neither the Navy nor the Army has the power to impose upon Germany any form of immediate pressure'.⁽⁹⁾

There was no substantial change in this concept of the likely early stages of a war against Germany from the beginning of the rearmament period down to the outbreak of war. In their 'European Appreciation, 1939-40', prepared in February 1939, the Chiefs of Staff argued that, in her efforts to defeat Britain at the outset, Germany would make a supreme effort to destroy her enemy's trade and shipping by naval action and her vital industrial power by bombing. The Royal Navy, it was argued, could cope with the former problem with help from the Royal Air Force. So far as German air attack upon Great Britain was concerned, the only

reply here was defence by our fighters and A/A and counter-attack by our own bombers. Concluding their views on this subject the Chiefs of Staff wrote as follows:

'If the main effort of Germany were to be directed against this country we should have to devote all our resources to defeating it. . . .

At sea our superiority should enable us to take the initiative at the outset and commence the application of economic pressure on Germany and Italy as well as attacking any hostile naval forces which might expose themselves.

Our air striking force, whatever its strategic rôle may be, would at least carry the attack into enemy territory, while our fighter aircraft and A/A defence should take a considerable toll of the enemy bombers.'⁽¹⁰⁾

The second strategic reason for the high priority accorded to Air Force programmes stemmed from the argument that Britain could not afford to spend to an equal degree on all three Services and that, within the limits of what was financially available, concentration on the Royal Air Force would show a higher return for money spent than expansion of the other two Services, especially the Army. This view was strongly supported by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Chamberlain, in December 1936, when he opposed the suggestion of the Secretary of State for War that money should be allocated to make it possible to send twelve Territorial divisions overseas with a minimum of delay after the outbreak of war in order to reinforce the Regular Army.* In countering this proposal the Chancellor argued that it was not possible to consider the Army in isolation from what was proposed for the Navy and Air Force. Indeed, the two latter had first claim, not least because the country's geographical position made it unnecessary to maintain a large army ready for war at a moment's notice, and because the real danger in the future was from a knock-out blow from the air. He then continued:

'It is thus open to us, if we so choose, to devote a correspondingly larger proportion of our available resources to the Air Arm than is the case with Continental Powers. The Air arm has emerged in recent years as a factor of first-rate, if not decisive importance.'

If this choice of concentrating on air power were made, Britain would probably attain a far greater degree of strength than by spending money on a large army.

'Should we not be wise to exploit these factors to the full, and to build up an Air Force which might well exercise a preponderating influence, rather than to spend our resources on equipping

* See above, pp. 445-47.

in peace-time a military force which could only be small compared with Continental armies?'⁽¹¹⁾

Whether one agrees with Mr. Chamberlain's views or not, it is important to remember that he carried the majority of his colleagues along with him even while he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that he continued to hold these views and put them into practice after he became Prime Minister and until the spring of 1939.

The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence made much the same point in February 1937, while Mr. Duff Cooper's memorandum on the rôle of the Army was still under discussion.

'There is no doubt', wrote the Minister, 'about the almost universal unwillingness of the country to prepare an army on anything like the 1914-1918 scale. This is partly based on reasoning that the new factor which has come into existence in the shape of the Royal Air Force should count for a great deal of the effort which the Army made in the Great War, and partly also on the instinctive feeling that we simply cannot sustain a large army in peace while we maintain a very powerful and modern Navy and an equally powerful and up-to-date Air Force.'⁽¹²⁾

Whatever sentiment and instinct might prescribe, and while admitting that the Cabinet conducted a careful analysis of the defence programmes on a purely cost basis during 1937-38, it still remains true, however, that there was no cost-effectiveness analysis of one programme as against another, and the view that money spent on air programmes was money better spent than in other possible ways remained, until war broke out, a speculation.*

There is one further matter in this connection which has been mentioned already but which should be emphasised here. While it is true that the strategy for a war against Germany—as also against Japan and Italy—was largely based upon periodic appreciations prepared by the Chiefs of Staff, the rearmament policy based on those appreciations, and therefore the final form of strategy to be adopted, was ultimately decided by the Cabinet. The Cabinet had to take into account factors with which the Chiefs of Staff were not directly concerned, political, financial and industrial factors, and sometimes the result was a policy which reflected serious differences of view between Ministers and their military advisers. One notable example of this difference of view arose over the distribution of the rearmament programme. The priority given to Air Force expansion was, as a rule, the work of Ministers; the Chiefs of Staff usually produced what they considered to be more balanced schemes in which the claims of the three Services were more evenly apportioned.

* See above, pp. 449 and 454.

For example, the Chiefs of Staff complained, in April 1935, when the second independent Air Force expansion programme was being considered,* that preparations for the different Services were, contrary to their own original suggestion in the initial D.R.C. Report, now getting out of step. The proposals concerning the Air Force alone which were now before them ought, they stated, to be considered by Ministers in the light of the overall defence situation. When the D.R.C. had got to work in November 1933, great stress had been laid by the Prime Minister and by other Ministers on the importance of the co-ordinated study of defence questions as a whole. Now, in the spring of 1935, the Government's professional military advisers were being asked for their views about the independent expansion of one Service in the light of the threat from only one potential enemy—Germany. They, the Chiefs of Staff, considered that the risks of war against Germany should be considered not only from a solely British point of view but also in the context of a situation in which Britain would be allied with France and Belgium.

'In the latter situation', they wrote, 'as fully set out in the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Defence Requirements, the Low Countries (Belgium and Holland) are vital to our security from the point of view of both Naval and Air defence, and, in the opinion of the Government's technical advisers, can only be defended by the provision of the military forces to co-operate with other countries concerned. If that is the assumption it appears that, concurrently with the large increase in the Royal Air Force contemplated in the Chief of the Air Staff's proposals, the state of preparedness of the Field Force, the provision for which was heavily curtailed by the Ministerial Committee, ought to be accelerated.

If the threat of war is so serious and so immediate, it will not be enough to be prepared in the air alone; otherwise our scheme of national defence will be incomplete.'⁽¹³⁾

When the full Ministerial Committee on Defence met on 27th May 1935,† to consider this report of the Chiefs of Staff, the same point came up again for detailed discussion. The First Sea Lord, Lord Chatfield, said it was felt that recent action taken by the Government had changed the general framework within which defence arrangements had previously been drawn up.‡ While in no way minimising the value of a large air force as a deterrent, both in a military and in a political sense, its deterrent effect would appear to be applicable only to a Power which proposed to commit an

* See above, Chapter V, Section 4.

† Later to become the Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. on Defence Policy and Requirements (D.P.R.).

‡ i.e. the Ministerial changes in First Report of the D.R.C. and the separate plans for more rapid expansion of the Air Force of November 1934.

aggressive act directly against Britain. It might well be, however, that we would find ourselves involved in a European war in which Germany's first objective would be some other nation. If this proved to be the case, then it would not be enough to be ready only in the air; we ought to be prepared with all our forces. The Chiefs of Staff had, in fact, recently repeated much the same view in a report on the re-orientation of the air defence system of Great Britain, in which they had commented:

'The action of the Field Force in contesting the occupation by Germany of the Low Countries is of such importance, both as an aid to our own offensive air operations and as a check upon the action of the enemy against objectives in this country, both by air and sea, that the needs of that force should be provided concurrently with the air defence measures now under consideration.'⁽¹⁴⁾

At this meeting, in May 1935, the discussion in fact developed not so much on the specific issue nominally under review, i.e. whether or not current air programmes were likely to produce 'parity' with Germany, but on the broader issue of whether separate plans for the air were likely to upset the balance of overall defence planning. In particular it now began to appear that plans for the Royal Air Force assumed an earlier target date for completion than did the deficiency programmes for the other two Services and, in doing so, inevitably prompted the question whether all three Services were preparing for the same war. In the end Chamberlain admitted the force of this criticism. A year earlier, he said, the Chiefs of Staff had been given—at the point when the first deficiency programme had been finally approved—estimates of the time within which their preparations should be completed. What the Chiefs of Staff now wished to know was whether the new time basis which applied to the Royal Air Force affected the conclusions earlier arrived at in regard to the other two Services. This seemed to him a fair question. His own opinion was that the new suggested programme for the Royal Air Force did materially affect the situation, and that the whole defence position should be reviewed in the light of new facts and new expenditure. It was impossible to contemplate greatly increased expenditure on the Royal Air Force without considering the implications for the defence programmes as a whole. The meeting therefore concluded with a recommendation, later approved by the Cabinet, for another full-scale enquiry into the state of the defence programmes. This was the enquiry which led to the Third Report of the D.R.C. and the White Paper on Defence of March 1936.*

The Chiefs of Staff expressed similar views in early 1937 at a time

* See above, Chapter V, Section 5 and Chapter VII, Section 4.

when the Secretary of State for War was being asked to reconsider the rôle of the Army and, in particular, that of the Territorial forces. This time the Government's reference to its military advisers was specifically in the form of a request for a comparison of the relative merits of land and air forces, as a deterrent, at 'equivalent expenditure'. Again, the reply was a denial that such a comparison could properly be made given the uncertainties about air power itself, about what sort of war was to be expected and how it might develop. Once again the Chiefs of Staff insisted that all three Services had 'their own rôles which they must be prepared to fulfil in co-operation with each other'; it was as misleading to discuss their relative value as to compare the 'merits of infantry and artillery . . . in a division of the Army'. Certainly financial cost was no guide.^{(15)*}

Ministers and their technical advisers sometimes differed in their views about the proper distribution of effort in the defence programmes not only because of financial considerations but also because of the relative weight given to the importance of public opinion. Public opinion in the nineteen-thirties appears to have decided that air attack was the most serious source of danger to this country. Ministers, some of them already holding this view in any case, felt bound to recognise and accede to the strength of public opinion in the matter, and so felt an even greater need to concentrate effort where effort was already being concentrated anyway. A notable example of the attention paid to public opinion in air matters occurred in Ministerial revision of the recommendations of the D.R.C. in their first deficiency report of February 1934. It will be remembered that Ministers subsequently altered a recommendation to implement the 52 squadrons scheme for home defence and approved a 75 squadron plan in its place. These new plans were completed and announced to Parliament well before the rest of the programme, and one reason given for this step was that it was necessary to quieten widespread public anxiety.

The final Ministerial report on the complete 1934 deficiency programme, drawn up and circulated to the Cabinet after the public announcement about the air programme had already been made, returned to this same point about public opinion and rearmament in the air.

'Although currents of more or less uninformed public opinion at home ought never to be a deterring factor in defensive preparations, they have to be reckoned with in asking Parliament to approve programmes of expenditure. In the present case it happened that the general trend of public opinion appeared to coincide with our own views as to the desirability of a consider-

* See also above, pp. 449 and 454.

able expansion of the Royal Air Force for home defence. In fact . . . the pressure for some statement of the Government's air defence policy before the Parliamentary recess became so strong that we were obliged to anticipate this Report on Imperial Defence as a whole by an interim Report on Air Defence.'⁽¹⁶⁾

Again, both the 'crash' air programmes of November 1934 and May 1935 were inspired not only by the Government's own fears about the speed of German rearmament, but also by its need to satisfy public opinion that the air threat was being taken seriously and parity maintained. At a meeting of the D.C.(M) on 27th May 1935, it was said, specifically in relation to the proposed new air programme, that 'it was essential to quieten public opinion in this country regarding the European situation'.⁽¹⁷⁾

It would certainly be misleading to suggest either that Ministers and their technical advisers were constantly at loggerheads in these matters, or that the Chiefs of Staff omitted to include, in their discussions and advice, factors of importance outside the purely military field. But it is true that, in these years, Ministers on several occasions gave a degree of priority to rearmament in the air—whether because of the pressure of public opinion or because of their view that financial limitations compelled this—which the Chiefs of Staff, in their collective capacity, looked upon as upsetting the proper balance of overall defence policy. And it would be a superficial explanation of this difference to credit it solely to a tendency on the part of the Chiefs of Staff to compromise among themselves simply in order to effect an equal division of the cake.

2. *The Principle of Parity*

Since Germany was regarded as the chief potential enemy of this country, and since it was assumed that Germany could strike most effectively against us by air attack, it seemed to follow that the estimated strength of the German air force should be used as a yardstick for Britain's expansion programmes. For generations the size of the Royal Navy had been calculated by comparison with the naval strength of Britain's leading rivals at sea. It is not surprising, therefore, that the principle of parity was appealed to during the pre-war years in connection with the R.A.F. But, having said that, it should also be said that there was not always agreement about the need for parity or, indeed, about the precise meaning of the term itself. So far as the layman was concerned, and particularly the politician appealing either to colleagues in the Cabinet or to Parliament or to the public at large, 'parity' seemed a simple concept with an attractively definite meaning; here was a word in which, or so it seemed, policy could be summed up and from which debate could be generated. It had something of the compendious quality

which the word 'deterrent' had for a later generation. Moreover, and the comment is made without intending to blame or patronize, in the less developed conditions of the general strategic debate of the nineteen-thirties, the ambiguous and potentially misleading connotations of such a word were sometimes less than carefully examined.

For the professional, the airman, the problem was a more complicated one. The proper size of the R.A.F., from his point of view, was determined rather by the operational responsibilities assigned to it than by the size of the air force of any particular enemy. His doctrine was similar in many ways to the traditional naval one. In the air, as on the sea, the object of operations was to attain command or supremacy; that in turn involved, among other things, the fundamental idea of seeking out the enemy and destroying him so that he, the enemy, should be prevented from doing his own job of destruction. In other words, offence was the best defence. But complete command would come about only with a successful end to hostilities. Before that stage, and particularly with the opportunities for evasion which the air offered, enemy bombers would continue to operate and some defence must be provided against them. What was wanted, therefore, was a balanced force of fighters and bombers.^{(18)*} The number of fighters would be determined by the features of areas likely to be attacked and by the expected scale of attack. Both factors could change. The enemy might expand the threat by new and/or more bombers; he might enhance his chances of successful attack by acquiring airfields closer to the targets. The desirable number of bombers was determined by the size and quality of those elements of the enemy's striking power capable of attacking Britain herself and her sea-borne trade. It was this striking power which had to be attacked and weakened at source—if possible.

But there were other complications in the assessment of desirable strength, complications of which airmen were often far more aware than either the public at large or politicians. If parity was taken to mean simply numerical equality or some fixed proportionate relationship in first-line strength, then it could prove a misleading approach to prospects in war. In the first place, no fighting force which is likely to incur heavy casualties can reasonably plan to operate over any length of time without strong reserves. Secondly, the quality of men and machines can be as important as numbers. These matters were made clear by the Air Ministry only a few months before the outbreak of war in a paper which pointed out that—

'... first line strength in peace, if it is to be measured merely in terms of the number of aircraft in operational units, is no criterion of real air strength. It must be supported by reserves of

* This doctrine was reaffirmed by the Air Ministry as late as November 1938.

aircraft and trained personnel—the indispensability of which is sometimes overlooked—backed in their turn by a large potential for the production of both aircraft and trained crews after the outbreak of war.’⁽¹⁹⁾

The correct way of looking at first-line strength, therefore, was as the apex of a pyramid built upon a base of combined training and reserve needs. Moreover, insofar as parity involved—as it did continuously throughout the period 1934-39—a comparison with a growing enemy threat, then the total numbers of aircraft and aircrews to be planned for demanded a rate of production of men and machines to provide for training and wastage, reserves and first-line strength on an expanding scale all at the same time. Since, in these years, the supply of each essential item was less than demand, there had to be an order of priorities which itself changed according to changing circumstances. And the result sometimes seemed to those not in the R.A.F. to be strangely out of proportion to the time and money involved.

For example, in the spring of 1938 the Cabinet authorised the maximum possible production of aircraft up to a total of 12,000 during the next two years.⁽²⁰⁾ In the autumn of that year, during the post-Munich overhaul of our defence preparations, the Air Ministry put forward plans for a further expansion, known as Scheme ‘M’.* In discussions on these proposals both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer commented that they were struck by the contrast between the large numbers of aircraft produced and the very much smaller numbers actually going into first-line service; the production of up to 12,000 aircraft had been authorised, but Scheme M provided for only 5,800 going into first-line and reserve. The reply of the Air Ministry made the contrast seem even more marked. There were about 17,500 aircraft outstanding on existing orders and 12,000 recently authorised, making a grand total of approximately 29,500. These aircraft were to be allocated as follows:

| Table 15 | |
|---|------------|
| Operational Allocation of British Aircraft, Spring, 1938 | |
| (i) First line (including Fleet Air Arm and overseas squadrons) | 3,535 |
| Reserves | 7,475 |
| (ii) Training and Miscellaneous | 2,750 |
| Reserves | 7,250 |
| (iii) Wastage for 4 years at 2,000 p.a. | 8,000 |
| | <hr/> (21) |
| Total | 29,010 |

* See below, Chapter XV, Section 4.

It should also be remembered, if some of these figures seem surprisingly large, that expansion was taking place simultaneously with the introduction of new and more complicated equipment which, in turn, demanded that an increasing proportion of training be carried on in terms of multiple aircrew rather than single pilots.

Finally, given the premises of Air Staff doctrine, then it followed that there was no fixed ratio of fighters to bombers. The operations of the two would, of course, interact, and if either accomplished less than was expected in its own rôle, the other might well find its operational responsibilities increased; moreover, against the background of the comparative growth or decline of two air forces the demand for the one or the other type could change. But, and whatever occasional *dicta* may have marked the early history of air power, the R.A.F. at no time assumed that its expansion programmes should be governed by ratios comparable, for example, to those advocated by sailors in planning the various components of the battle-fleet.

While, however, airmen were aware of the many complications which made any particular definition of parity potentially misleading, they did sometimes use the term themselves, mostly in connection with the bomber force, and could hardly avoid doing so. Had it been possible to plan for an aircraft and a bomb for every conceivable target some kind of absolute strength might have been calculated. But since this was not possible, it was virtually inevitable that our own desired strength in bombers should be reckoned as not less than that of the potential enemy whether in numbers of aircraft or in total bomb load. Unfortunately, the critical development of the four-engined bomber, the new weapon which was at last going to make it possible to talk in terms of much greater bomb load with fewer aircraft was itself far from complete at the outbreak of war and therefore figured less prominently in this debate than it would have done in happier circumstances.* The result was that, between 1936 and 1939, at a time when we were trying to catch up with an enemy who was already ahead in numbers of aircraft, and when it was not possible to claim an important lead in the quality of machines in and coming into operational service, numbers were bound to count and be counted, even within the R.A.F.†

Let us now turn back to look in more detail at the meanings given to the word 'parity' and the ways in which alterations in meaning were linked with changes in expansion programmes. On 8th March

* See below, pp. 583-87.

† Commenting on this chapter Lord Swinton wrote to the author—'Parity—not a term produced by the Air Ministry. It was I think coined by Lord Baldwin.' By thus dismissing the term he appears to suggest that it was a concept foreign to R.A.F. calculations, whereas in fact the need to evaluate the efficiency of the R.A.F. in comparison with the leading continental air forces kept this term constantly in use.

1934 Mr. Baldwin stated in the House of Commons, during the debate on the Air Estimates—

'In conclusion, I say that if all our efforts fail . . . then . . . this Government will see to it that in air strength and air power this country shall no longer be in a position inferior to any country within striking distance of our shores.'⁽²²⁾*

And later in the same year, during the November debates on speeding up the air expansion programme, he repeated this promise specifically in relation to Germany.⁽²³⁾

However dramatic these pronouncements at the time they did not, in fact, enunciate a new principle. The Salisbury Committee of 1923 argued that Britain must have a 'Home Defence Air Force of sufficient strength adequately to protect us against air attack by the strongest air force within striking distance of this country', and that principle formed the basis of the 52 squadron scheme for the R.A.F. which remained in force down to 1934. The French air striking force was then the standard against which to measure our own strength. What had happened by 1934-35 was that, even if Germany did not yet possess the strongest air force within striking distance of this country, she threatened soon to reach that strength and was already, potentially at any rate, our most dangerous enemy. The same theme appeared in the spring of 1935. On 22nd May, and following the Foreign Secretary's visit to Berlin, Mr. Baldwin reported to the House of Commons—

'In the course of those conversations Herr Hitler made it clear that his goal [i.e. in air force expansion] was parity with France. Now we are basing our estimates on that strength. It is always difficult to know what parity is, or from what angle it is envisaged. We have to make a certain amount of guesswork there, and for our purpose, for the parity of the three nations, we have taken a figure round about 1,500 first-line aircraft . . . And that is the figure at which we are aiming, and to which we intend to proceed with all the speed we can.'⁽²⁴⁾

Eighteen months later, on 12th November 1936, Winston Churchill stated categorically in the House, and his statement was not questioned, that 'we were promised most solemnly by the Government that air parity with Germany would be maintained by the home defence forces'.⁽²⁵⁾

This last comment is of some importance for our purposes. From 1934 onwards parity implied a comparison of Britain's Metropolitan

* See above, pp. 104-06.

Air Force with the total German Air Force and the British Metropolitan Air Force excluded the Fleet Air Arm and all aircraft stationed overseas. This was explained to the House of Commons both in May and again in July 1935, when Scheme 'C' was under discussion. On the latter occasion the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Swinton, was specific that 'both the overseas squadrons and the Fleet Air Arm are excluded entirely from this programme of home defence'.⁽²⁶⁾ The Metropolitan Air Force, the symbol of the concept of 'parity', included all home based squadrons which, from 1936 onwards, were administered by Fighter, Bomber and Coastal Commands. In other words, it embraced not only all fighter and bomber aircraft, but also general reconnaissance aircraft and Army co-operation (reconnaissance) aircraft which, from 1936 onwards, came under the administrative control of Fighter Command.

At first, parity was taken literally to mean equality in total numbers of all aircraft, fighters, bombers and other types. That is made clear in the two reports of the Sub-Committee on Air Parity set up after the Foreign Secretary's visit to Berlin early in 1935, and from the minutes of the D.C.(M.) which considered these reports.⁽²⁷⁾ In their first report the Sub-Committee devoted a separate section to a definition of parity and an examination of the problems involved in making such a definition comprehensive.

'In defining what we mean by "parity", they wrote, 'we considered that the first point on which we must arrive at a decision was whether we should be justified in excluding any German military aircraft from the Force against which we must build. It is no doubt true, for example, that, as Germany has a much larger army than our own, she requires a larger number of army co-operation aircraft. The contention has also been advanced that the really important consideration is the number of bombing aircraft which Germany could employ against this country. We are convinced, however, that it would be impossible, in view of our categorical statements, to exclude from the German "Parity Force" any aircraft unless we had the most absolute and unanswerable reasons for doing so. In these circumstances we are agreed that for the purposes of calculation we must assume "parity" to mean numerical equality with the total German Air Force.'⁽²⁸⁾

Even at this early period, however, it was clear to many people that numerical equality and parity were not necessarily identical. Types of aircraft, relative performance, standards of training and availability of reserves could all, or any one of them, make a substantial difference to operational results. During a discussion in April 1935, Mr. Chamberlain agreed that the Government must

honour its promise of parity in a general way, but he added that he thought Ministers were entitled to put their own detailed construction on their official promise. It was not always necessary he argued, to talk in exact numbers of aircraft, but rather to deal with the matter in terms of air power and overall air strength. It would be for the Government to state what, in their opinion, constituted air strength, and it was up to them to make up their minds both what that meant in terms of aircraft and what measures would then be necessary to honour the Government's promise.⁽²⁹⁾ In fact, the new programme which soon took shape after that discussion kept to the standard of numerical equality, but it was the last to do so.

In two papers prepared for the Cabinet in January 1937 Lord Swinton developed the argument made by Mr. Chamberlain nearly two years before. His first memorandum listed the various 'parity' pledges given by Governments since March 1934, pledges which, Lord Swinton argued, made it clear 'that in assessing whether or not we are inferior to Germany, we have committed ourselves quite definitely to taking as a standard of comparison the German Air Force and our Metropolitan Air Force'. Such a standard could not honestly be taken to include a reckoning of squadrons overseas. If his view were accepted, Lord Swinton continued, then he submitted that there were two considerations to which air expansion policy should conform. First, it should be in accordance with the 'parity' pledges given. Second, that such a policy should avoid being bound by literal tests of numerical parity which, in his view, were 'wholly unreal'. He went on:

'I would suggest, therefore, that our interpretation of the Prime Minister's pledge should be to this effect:

We are determined that we will not be inferior in air strength at home to any country within striking distance of our shores. This implies—

- (i) That we should build and maintain a defensive force adequate to meet any anticipated scale of attack.
- (ii) That we should build and maintain a counter-offensive force not inferior in power and efficiency to the offensive force of a foreign Power/German Offensive Force.'⁽³⁰⁾

What this meant, in simple language, was a bomber force not inferior to that of Germany and a fighter force of a strength requisite to meet the probable scale of German attack. So far as the bomber force was concerned, its effective strength would depend not merely on numbers, but also on range, performance and load. But if superiority in these latter characteristics could not be guaranteed (and, at this stage, Lord Swinton admitted that no such guarantee could

be given) then, in practice, a return to the aim of an equal number of first-line bomber aircraft, with adequate reserves, was inevitable.⁽³¹⁾

At a Cabinet meeting on 27th January, Lord Swinton developed his views further. He was anxious, he said, to get away from the interpretation of the pledges as denoting a mere comparison of British machine with German machine. If he had *carte blanche* with the Royal Air Force he would not make it identical, machine for machine, with that of Germany. The mere counting of machines was not the correct interpretation of parity. What he would wish for, and what in fact the Air Council were aiming at, was that we should be in a sufficiently strong position strategically to provide for our defensive needs including the counter-offensive force. While some members of the Cabinet expressed apprehension about the public outcry which would almost certainly follow if the rejection of the idea of numerical equality was seen as the surrender of an otherwise undefined conception of 'parity', the Cabinet, in the end, did not reject Lord Swinton's view.^{(32)*}

Some months later the Secretary of State for Air and the Air Staff elaborated their definition of 'parity'. In October 1937 the Air Staff drew up a long memorandum on 'The Requisite Standard of Air Strength', and this, together with a covering memorandum by Lord Swinton was submitted to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence then engaged in his major investigation into the programmes of the three Services.^{(34)†} The Air Staff memorandum began by claiming that it was the established policy of H.M. Government, in regard to the strength of the Metropolitan Air Force, to maintain a force of such strength and composition as would 'constitute the most effective deterrent against German aggression'. That policy, the memorandum continued, had been generally interpreted as implying a parity of striking power with Germany and quoted, as evidence for this, Mr. Baldwin's assurance to the House of Commons on 8th March 1934.‡ The memorandum then went on to point out that there were two factors which affected the practical application of this policy. First, equality in air strength with a potential opponent

* There was a full-dress debate in both Houses on 12th May 1938, clearly suggesting that opinion was generally against the views of Government spokesmen and in favour of the more obvious interpretation of parity. This traditional point of view was taken up much later by Mr. Churchill when commenting on the Norway campaign on 8th May 1940. Replying to criticisms for never taking the initiative in that campaign and for always waiting for the enemy to move first, he commented that, 'The reason for this serious disadvantage of our not having the initiative is one which cannot speedily be removed, and it is our failure in the last five years to maintain or regain air parity in numbers with Germany. . . . The fact of our numerical deficiency in the air, in spite of our superiority in quality, both in men and material . . . has condemned us, and will condemn us for some time to come, to a great deal of difficulty and suffering and danger . . .'⁽³³⁾

† For the Minister's investigation as a whole see above, p. 282 ff. The Air Ministry's proposals on the first draft ultimately became known as expansion Scheme 'J'. Some of the details of this and other schemes are discussed more fully in the next chapter.

‡ See above, p. 543.

did not necessarily involve 'exact numerical parity in first-line aircraft'. Relative vulnerability, relative completeness and effectiveness of passive air defence measures, relative performance of aircraft and aircrew—all were to be weighed in the balance. Second, there was the difficulty of ascertaining the precise level in terms of first-line aircraft at which numerical parity should be sought, owing to the fact that foreign Powers, especially Germany, were careful to avoid the publication of details of their air programmes, and were usually reluctant to give accurate information on this score even on a basis of strict reciprocity. From this it was concluded that—

'The only satisfactory method of approach to this question is, therefore, to formulate the closest possible estimate of German air strength, present and projected, taking all relevant factors and all available information into consideration, and then to decide on the strength and composition of the air force which we require to enable us to engage on equal terms in a war with that country.'

It seems from this memorandum that, in the view of the Air Staff, parity in the sense of the pledges already given by the Government had again come to mean numerical equality but, in practice, numerical equality in bomber forces only. 'As far as air forces are concerned', they wrote, '... The sum and substance of the equality which we require lies in the number and offensive power of the bomber types which constitute the respective air striking forces.'⁽³⁵⁾ So far as other types were concerned special needs would affect the issue. For example, the number of fighter aircraft required for local air defence was determined, so the argument ran, 'by the extent, importance and vulnerability of the areas to be defended and bears no relation to German fighter strength.'

Lord Swinton, himself, was not entirely satisfied with the completeness of the Air Staff view. The element of defence in the whole assessment obviously seemed to him to need rather more emphasis. Therefore he added to the Air Staff appreciation that the standard of air strength to be aimed at was affected by more than the Royal Air Force alone.

'We cannot create an effective deterrent', he wrote, 'and we cannot pretend that we could meet an opposing Force on equal terms unless we are satisfied that our ground defences will bear adequate comparison with those of the enemy; and ground defences include both active defence by such means as guns, searchlights, balloon barrage and passive defence in the shape of air raid precautions.'⁽³⁶⁾

This tendency to stress defence in the concept of parity which included power both to deter and to wage war on roughly equal

terms was soon afterwards emphasised by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence in his answer to the Air Staff memorandum. The latter had made it clear that airmen regarded it as of fundamental importance that we should maintain an air striking force equal to the German air striking force, and that we should be able to hit them as hard as they could hit us. Many arguments had been advanced in support of this view. First, that although considerable improvement had been made in air defences there was, in fact, no sure means of defence. Counter-attack remained, therefore, the best deterrent and best defence. Second, the deterrent effect was greatly increased if an aggressor knew that he would receive as much damage as he dealt out. Third, the counter-offensive could reduce and perhaps immobilise the enemy's striking force and also reduce his capacity to manufacture munitions and replace wastage. Finally, if attacks against him were relaxed, the enemy would be able to devote a large part of his resources to his own means of attack.

'I am not wholly convinced by these arguments', Sir Thomas Inskip wrote. 'I agree, of course, that it is necessary that we should have a strong air striking force capable of effective retaliation; but it does not seem to me that our air striking force could only act as an effective deterrent if it were able to drop the same number and type of bombs on the aggressor, day in and day out, as that country could drop on us. . . .

I regard, however, the public statements made as to parity as intended to convey our determination to be able to cope with any Continental power in the air, and I should not regard the statements made as in any way compelling us to base either the numbers or the types of our aeroplanes on the numbers and types of a potential enemy.'

On the strength of his doubts about the current Air Staff interpretation of 'parity' he therefore recommended the Cabinet first, to provide the full increases asked for in the fighter squadrons of the Metropolitan Force and second, while allowing for some increase in the bomber squadrons of that force, to make very considerably reduced provision for war reserves and greatly improved arrangements for the development of war potential.⁽³⁷⁾

If there was any doubt about Inskip's reasoning he made his view clear at the Cabinet meeting of 22nd December 1937, at which his report was first considered in detail. Concerning the Air Force, he pointed out, the principal issue arose in connection with bomber aircraft which had been the subject of some controversy between the Air Staff and himself. He held the view that, in order to implement official pledges about air parity, we must have enough fighters in this country to defend ourselves, but that this need not necessarily

apply to bombers. In other words, he thought that parity could be achieved by a force sufficient to resist an aggressor without our necessarily possessing the same numbers and types of bombers to take to the offensive against him. The Air Staff, on the other hand, took the view that to provide an inferior force of bombers would not measure up to the Government's pledges and would have a defeatist appearance.⁽³⁸⁾

While accepting many of Inskip's recommendations, Lord Swinton challenged his arguments about parity and bombers. The man in the street, said Lord Swinton, would probably take parity to mean an equal number of machines overall. He and his advisers had not done that. The Air Staff in making their calculations had eliminated all other types, e.g. fighter, reconnaissance, army co-operation aircraft, and had taken into account only bombers which could be used against this country. They had then asked for an equal number of British first-line machines in order to conduct offensive operations on a comparable basis.

In the general discussion which followed the Secretary of State for Air received strong support from more than one of his colleagues both on the ground that the carefully considered advice of the Air Staff should not be tampered with, and also on the ground that the revised suggestions of Sir Thomas Inskip, with their emphasis on fighters, savoured too much of defence. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, recalled that Lord Trenchard had always advocated the provision of three bomber squadrons to one of fighters,* and he himself hoped that the Cabinet would not come to any decision giving full approval to current proposals for fighters but limiting bombers. At the end of the discussion, however, the Cabinet authorised Inskip to proceed for the present on the basis of his own proposals in consultation with the Secretary of State for Air, although no final and long-term approval, in principle, was given to his views. If more money became available, the possibility of doing more for the Air Force could be considered.⁽³⁹⁾

Inskip's plans were worked out in detail, on paper, during the next few months.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Then the Austrian crisis overtook the Cabinet's deliberations, and new plans were asked for providing for an acceleration of the Air Force and anti-aircraft programmes.⁽⁴¹⁾ By now, certainly as far as Ministers were concerned, discussion of any particular interpretation of 'parity' was giving way to more practical considerations.⁽⁴²⁾ The vital thing was to produce the maximum number of aircraft within what was considered the critical period, i.e. the next two years. The main difficulties were

* In the 52 Squadron Scheme, however, the actual ratio of bombers to fighters was not 3:1 but 35:17.

factory labour and getting enough officers and men into the Royal Air Force. As a result of these pressures and conditions the Cabinet gradually came to the conclusion that the correct policy for the expansion of the Royal Air Force was to aim at the maximum output of aircraft in the next two years, securing acceleration of suitable types now in production and bringing into production, as soon as possible, the latest improved types. The Prime Minister explained to his colleagues that aircraft firms had been asked to state the maximum number of aircraft they could produce by 31st March 1940. The result was an estimate of 4,000 aircraft by 31st March 1939, and a further 8,000 aircraft during the next twelve months; and Mr. Chamberlain said specifically that he would rather not relate these figures to any particular programme. At the end of a long discussion the Cabinet agreed to authorise the Air Ministry to accept as many aeroplanes as they could obtain up to a maximum of 12,000 machines during the next two years.⁽⁴³⁾

Although the number of aircraft envisaged in this new estimate was, in a sense, originally based on plans which were a compromise between bomber parity and fighter priority,* it is quite clear that the Cabinet was now concerned not with 'parity' according to any particular definition, but with 'security' as meaning the largest number of aircraft with the least loss of efficiency. The Government regarded the two years 1938-40 as a highly critical period, and were more concerned with obtaining the maximum production within the period than with detailed comparisons between the R.A.F. and the German Air Force. A memorandum prepared by the new Secretary of State for Air, Sir Kingsley Wood, in October 1938, pointed out:

'... that the programme authorised by the Cabinet in April last was dictated mainly by what were then considered to be the limitations of aircraft production and was not related to the possible German air strength by the date when it was due for completion.'⁽⁴⁴⁾

It would be unfair to the Air Staff to claim either that a comparison with German air strength was irrelevant to the planning of our own, or that the Cabinet had reached its decision in April 1938, after a considered rejection of the Air Staff's wish to base 'parity' upon a numerical estimate of bomber forces. As with the Navy, overall strength depended upon both relative and absolute needs, even though the basis of each might be a difficult and controversial matter. The decision of April 1938 was a result not so much of a specific

* i.e. Schemes K and L. See below, Chapter XV.

rejection of striking force numerical 'parity'—although important criticism on these lines had certainly grown stronger in the winter of 1937-38 as we have seen—as a response to two anxieties. The first was a fear that we were steadily dropping behind the Germans in air strength and not keeping up, in practice, to paper programmes. What was wanted, therefore, was every aircraft which could be obtained. The second anxiety arose from the increasingly strong assumption that the outbreak of war would witness a devastating air attack by the German Air Force on this country, and that our first need was, therefore, to guarantee home defence by fighter and ground forces. So far as the Cabinet was concerned this meant a greater emphasis on fighter than on bomber strength to a point where Ministers and the Air Staff were certain to disagree, since by now their strategic assumptions were to some extent different.⁽⁴⁵⁾

These developments went some way further before war broke out. In their proposals for the last big pre-war expansion programme, put forward when all programmes were being accelerated after Munich, the Air Ministry finally gave up all plans for numerical parity, even in bombers.

'To achieve equality in air striking power with Germany' their memorandum ran, 'does not necessarily involve matching every German bomber with one of our own, but it does mean that our striking force must be capable of delivering at least an equal load of bombs at the required range. The policy of the British Air Staff aims at developing the large high performance bomber capable of carrying very heavy bomb loads and a formidable defensive armament, while from our present information it appears that German policy is to distribute bombing capacity among a larger number of aircraft with smaller loads. Our present authorised programme thus involves the progressive replacement of the medium bomber class which . . . was introduced as an interim type in the early stages of expansion, with heavy bombers of greatly superior bomb load and range. . . .

Measured in terms of first-line numbers, bombing capacity or other yard-sticks, it would be difficult to maintain that the steps proposed will give full "parity" with Germany in the near future so long as she continues her unlimited effort. But it would, I think, be reasonable to claim that we should within a reasonable period, so far as the Royal Air Force is concerned, be adequately equipped to fulfil the objectives stated by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on 7th March 1938, viz:

- (i) Protection of this country.
- (ii) Preservation of the trade routes.
- (iii) Defence of British territories overseas.
- (iv) Co-operation in the defence of the territories of our allies in case of war.'⁽⁴⁶⁾

Two things are noticeable about this particular memorandum. First, that although numbers of aircraft are necessarily dealt with at length, the emphasis is on total numbers which can be produced by the aircraft industries of Germany and Britain rather than numbers of aircraft of any particular types. Second, there is a growing emphasis on qualitative comparison. As Lord Swinton had earlier pointed out, quantitative comparisons were inevitable until qualitative differences could be confidently assumed. Such an assumption was possible now. All-metal monoplane fighters with eight machine guns were coming into production, and four-engined bombers were at last beginning to emerge into planning figures.

The details of this particular programme will be considered in the next chapter.* The reception given to the proposals of the Secretary of State for Air by the Cabinet is, however, of interest here because it illustrates the developing view of Ministers about what standard of air strength was necessary. The latest Air Staff standard was the provision of enough fighters to oppose German long-range bombers, and a striking force of our own capable of delivering a bomb load equal to that of the German bomber fleet up to the required range. In explaining his proposals to the Cabinet on 7th November 1938 Sir Kingsley Wood reminded his colleagues once again that the programme of the previous April was not based on any measure of equality with Germany, but simply on the principle of giving sufficient orders fully to occupy the aircraft industry for a given period. His own proposals were based on two assumptions. First that we must increase our reserve strength and proceed with equipping the Royal Air Force with the latest types of machines. Second, that we must concentrate on building up our fighter strength.⁽⁴⁷⁾ However, he then felt bound to say that his own view, and that of the Air Ministry, was that while it was right that we should build up a strong force of fighters, nevertheless, if our real aim was to prevent war, then it was necessary to have a sufficient bomber force to ensure that any country wishing to attack us would realise that the game was not worth the candle. In other words, the bomber force was the best deterrent. Moreover, a heavy bomber programme afforded the best means of enabling this country to get on level terms with Germany despite deficiencies of some other kinds. Germany's policy had been to concentrate on giving large orders for a limited number of types; in addition, Germany would not make alterations in her programme until she had attained a substantial degree of strength. It was possible for this country, which had come into the field later, to concentrate on heavier types which were capable of inflicting a much greater

* See below, Chapter XV, Section 4.

degree of damage and which would thereby give us some advantage.

These proposals met with various criticisms, mostly adverse. Quite apart from financial difficulties they centred on two points. First, whether it was wise to concentrate on heavy bombers no single prototype of which had so far flown. Second, whether the bomber force could really be regarded as defensive, and whether equality in striking force implied at least an equal load of bombs at the required range. The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, arguing against this concept, said he thought that if we were to be in a position to create a deterrent effect it did not follow that any increase in German strength must necessarily be followed by an increase in our own strength. In the end Ministers showed clearly where their sympathies lay by agreeing to all the increases in fighter strength which the Secretary of State for Air had proposed. They further instructed Sir Kingsley Wood to look further into the policy of concentrating on heavy bombers in the light of the Cabinet discussion, at the same time agreeing, subject to further investigation, that sufficient orders for bombers should be placed to avoid substantial dismissals in the aircraft factories and to maintain an adequate flow of production.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Parity had now swung full circle from the concept of overall numerical equality with the German air force, through equality in striking forces, to the concept of absolute needs for home defence.

3. *The Concept of Deterrence*

It will have been noted that the word 'deterrent' was frequently used in ministerial discussions and, indeed, in the general public debate about the expansion of the Royal Air Force. It is important, however, not to regard the meaning of the word when used in the inter-war years as being synonymous with its meaning in strategic debates since 1945. The inter-war debate was carried on in much more traditional terms.

It is true that, in Britain, horror at the risks of air warfare bit deep. The 'bolt from the blue', the sudden overwhelming strike, the devastation of cities and vast civilian casualties were all likely consequences of a future war which seem most to have impressed the British public in the nineteen-thirties. To what extent this was a direct result of the experience of the First World War, and why that experience should have been so interpreted, is difficult to say. The fact is that 'unacceptable damage', even if not the phrase itself, was in the minds of some. Baldwin, whether as Lord President or Prime Minister, was foremost among those who expressed this view. His speech to the House of Commons on 9th November 1932 has often

been quoted, but was historically important enough to bear quoting again:

'I think,' he said, 'it is well also for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through . . . The only defence is in offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves. . . . If the conscience of the young men should ever come to feel with regard to this one instrument that it is evil and should go, the thing will be done; . . . the future is in their hands. But when the next war comes, and European civilisation is wiped out, as it will be and by no force more than by that force, . . . let them remember that they principally or they alone, are responsible for the terrors that have fallen upon the earth.'⁽⁴⁹⁾

However one may try to explain this 'curious outburst',⁽⁵⁰⁾ the fact is that Baldwin was not alone in the fear, however emotional and irrational, that European civilisation might be destroyed by bombs, hence the popularity of moves to control all aviation and even to abolish bombers. People did not have to read or even to know about the work of the Italian, Douhet, to think and feel in that way. To deter and thus prevent war seemed the only possible way out of this horrible dilemma.

Again, it is true that the policy of great first-line strength, even at the cost of war reserves, was more than once commended for its deterrent value, almost as though there were those who were already thinking of rearmament as preparation for deterrence by threats rather than actual fighting. Finally, there were occasionally remarks which suggest the yet further concept of deterrence through the threat of mutually unacceptable damage. Urging his colleagues, in October 1938, to plan for increased production of aircraft, as well as of weapons and equipment for active and passive air defence, Sir Kingsley Wood told them that, in his view—

'our air force should be built up to a strength sufficient to protect this country and to act as a deterrent to possible enemies, so that whatever the strength of the German air force, Germany itself would risk destruction if they attacked us.'⁽⁵¹⁾

Nevertheless, there is a difference between the concept of deterrence in Britain in the nineteen-thirties and that which has become generally accepted in the nuclear context of a generation later. For politicians and public alike war was an abomination which ought to be avoided if at all possible; but it was not regarded, certainly not by Ministers, as something which was virtually impossible because

unacceptable. The Royal Air Force was undoubtedly seen as the main deterrent to German aggression; it was also assumed—and not by airmen alone—to be a weapon which could and would be used if necessary. Whatever the fears of the unknown, and air warfare on a vast scale was still that, despite the experience of the First World War—the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy were designed as fighting weapons to provide for initial defence behind which the reserves of national strength could be mobilised and then deployed. It was, basically, a traditional strategy, not the strategy of a new age; and traditional both as a long-term fighting strategy and as one in which it was hoped the evidence of a determination and ability to fight might deter a potential enemy from accepting the risks of war. But they were seen as risks, not as certainty. War might pay. As a deterrent the Royal Air Force of the nineteen-thirties was, and was seen by planners as, something more like the Royal Navy of the pre-1914 years than the nuclear bombers and missiles of the generation after 1945.

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- (41) Cab. Cons. 13(38)3 549
- (42) The Cabinet discussion of these new programmes was at two meetings on the 6th and 27th April 1938; Cab. Cons. 18(38)3, and Cab. Cons. 21(38). See also Cab. Cons. 19(38)3 549
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PART III

CHAPTER XV

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE: EXPANSION PROGRAMMES,

1936-39

Introductory Note

THE DETAILS of the expansion of the Royal Air Force in the years before the Second World War will be considered here in the context of successive programmes drawn up by the Air Ministry and then implemented, amended or rejected by the Cabinet in the light of political, financial, and sometimes military factors. It is probably true that, within the R.A.F., paper plans of this kind were sometimes considered either of relatively little significance or even an interruption of work already in hand. What mattered to practical airmen were the machines actually in service or coming forward from the factories; and they were certainly conscious of the fact (as Ministers do not always appear to have been) that even while new plans were being authorised, old plans were still far from complete. Nevertheless, despite its occasional air of unreality, this story does illustrate the direct and continuous impact of German plans upon our own, and is an essential part of the official strategic debate in these years.

1. Programmes 'A' to 'F', 1934-36

Before considering the major air expansion programmes of the years 1936-39 let us first summarise the details of earlier ones.

When the D.R.C. first met in late 1933 the Air Ministry were still working to the 52 Squadron programme for home defence originally approved in 1923. As we have seen, the completion of that programme, originally planned for 1928, was postponed several times and by 1933 only 42 squadrons were in service. The Royal Air Force as a whole at the end of 1933 consisted of 88 squadrons (of which 13 were non-regular) and a total full-time strength of about 970 aircraft. The very slow rate of expansion in the years immediately before the D.R.C. began its work is illustrated by the fact that whereas

28 new squadrons of the home defence force had been formed in the period 1923-27, only 9 further squadrons were added to the number in the years 1928-33. In 1932 and 1933 there had been a complete standstill. Overseas, the number of squadrons had remained stationary for 12 years, with the exception of 2 additional squadrons for India, and of one flying-boat squadron for the Persian Gulf.

It was hardly surprising, in the light of this very laboured progress and the contrasting evidence that Germany was not only re-arming but devoting special attention to rearmament in the air, that the Cabinet should have decided in the summer of 1934 to go well beyond a simple remedying of deficiencies and to launch out into the first of the genuine expansion rearmament programmes.* Moreover, in coming to this decision the Cabinet also decided that a larger proportion of the immediate increase in size of the Air Force should be allotted to the expansion of home defence which, at any rate for the time being, must be treated as more urgent than that of either overseas squadrons or the Fleet Air Arm. The Cabinet accordingly decided that the provision for home defence should be raised to 75 squadrons, instead of the former 52 squadrons and that these should be completed by April 1939.† At the same time the programme of new squadrons for overseas was limited to 4 (instead of the 9 originally proposed) while the Fleet Air Arm's new total of aircraft was to be limited to 213 (instead of the total of 402 proposed earlier by the D.R.C.).⁽¹⁾ On the basis of this programme which was announced in Parliament on 19th July 1934, the planned strength of the Royal Air Force by the end of 1938 was a total of 127 squadrons, equivalent to about 1,460 aircraft.⁽²⁾

The Air Ministry worked to this scheme, Scheme 'A', from July 1934 until April 1935. Even before the latter date, however, some doubts had been expressed as to its adequacy. In November 1934, therefore, in an attempt to allay anxiety which had been expressed in more than one quarter, H.M. Government announced their intention to provide 22 of the additional 33 squadrons for home defence by April 1937, leaving only 11 more squadrons to be formed during the following two years.‡ This speeding up process would also facilitate the formation in those years of a larger number of squadrons if events proved that a further expansion was necessary.

Doubts about the adequacy of Scheme 'A', and even of the speeding up of the scheme by the decision of November 1934, were

* In this respect the expansion programme for the R.A.F. of the summer of 1934 was different in kind from those planned for the Army and Navy.

† In order to convert home defence into 'metropolitan' air force one must add flying-boat and army co-operation squadrons, then numbering 9, an overall total of 84 squadrons.

‡ See above, p. 138.

brought to a head during Sir John Simon's visit to Berlin in March 1935. Although Hitler's claims on that occasion were not literally correct, it was nonetheless true that the programme of air development to which Germany was currently working would provide a minimum of 1,500 first-line aircraft, all of which would be located in the German metropolitan area.* In contrast with this the existing expansion programme of the R.A.F. was for 75 home defence (or 84 metropolitan) squadrons—approximately 960 first-line aircraft—and this was considered inadequate to honour the pledge given to Parliament by Mr. Baldwin on 18th November 1934, that H.M. Government were 'determined on no conditions to accept any position of inferiority with regard to what air force may be raised in Germany in the future'. A further substantial addition to the previous programme was accordingly announced to Parliament on 22nd May 1935. By this new programme, Scheme 'C', 39 squadrons would be added—over and above those included in the previous programme—to the metropolitan strength of the R.A.F. This further expansion was, moreover, to be accelerated with a view to completion by 1937 instead of, as previously, by 1939. Finally, the new programme made provision for increasing the first-line establishment in aircraft of a considerable number of squadrons and was designed to provide a metropolitan total of 1,512 first-line aircraft as compared with the 960 of Scheme 'A'.^{(3)†}

Scheme 'C' was an improvement on Scheme 'A' in so far as it increased the proportion of medium to light bombers in the striking force, but it suffered from the same basic defect as Scheme 'A' in that it made very little provision for reserves, a weakness which had led Lord Hailsham, Secretary of State for War, to condemn it as 'eyewash'. It was this same weakness which called forth strong criticism from the Chief of the Air Staff later that same year. Scheme 'C' would have provided an air force which would probably have been unable to go on fighting for more than a few weeks if, as was quite possible, severe losses had been incurred early on.^{(4)‡}

The ink of Scheme 'C' had hardly dried on the paper before Ministers were presented with yet further evidence of the increasing pace of German rearmament. In June 1935 they were warned that evidence available to the Chiefs of Staff made it clear that, although Germany would probably not be ready to wage aggressive war before 1939, yet she was already spending 'stupendous amounts' on rearmament.⁽⁵⁾ This evidence continued to accumulate, and the Statement relating to Defence of March 1936 spoke of 'the continuous development of the German Air Force'.⁽⁶⁾ That same White Paper therefore

* See above, p. 175.

† See above, p. 176.

‡ See above, p. 177.

announced yet another R.A.F. expansion programme, known as Scheme 'F'. This new scheme was designed not to increase the number of squadrons, but to improve offensive power and to increase the establishment of aircraft in certain types of squadron. The official view was that, while there was room for discussion as to the exact rate at which Germany would be able to form completely trained squadrons, it was becoming increasingly certain that immense activity prevailed behind the screen of secretiveness with which her preparations were covered. Moreover, this activity could well produce in the next few years a force which, even if not of a standard of training and organisation to compare with the R.A.F., might nevertheless be large and powerful enough to tempt Germany to commit armed aggression. The conversion was accordingly approved (as soon as suitable types of aircraft became available) of 19 regular light bomber to medium bomber squadrons, with an increase of their establishment from 12 to 18 aircraft per squadron. A further 11 non-regular squadrons were also to be converted to medium bombers, and an increase in establishment from 12 to 18 aircraft was approved for 10 other medium bomber squadrons. The overall effect of these increases would be to provide a total metropolitan strength of 1,736 aircraft, an increase not merely in numbers but in quality also. Finally Scheme 'F' provided to some extent for the hitherto neglected needs of the Fleet Air Arm and of overseas bases. For the latter, 10 additional squadrons were to be provided, of which 6 were for the Far East; and the planned strength of the Fleet Air Arm was now raised to a total of about 500 aircraft.

Scheme 'F' is of importance for several reasons. First, it strengthened the air striking force considerably by planning to eliminate light and to substitute medium bombers. Second, it aimed at making much more adequate provision than hitherto for war reserves, involving an increase in cost for this purpose from £1.2 million to £50 million and providing total reserves amounting to about 225 per cent of first-line aircraft.⁽⁷⁾ In other words it was a genuine 'non-window-dressing' programme, a programme designed for operational rather than political purposes. Third, it was the only pre-war expansion programme to be completed, remaining 'for nearly two years as the blueprint of expansion'.⁽⁸⁾

It is worthwhile comparing the expansion schemes so far, both in order to get a picture of the seriousness with which H.M. Government were undertaking plans for rearmament in the air and to provide a basis of comparison with the expansion schemes of the later thirties. The following table provides the comparison in purely numerical form:

Table 16
Summary of Planned Expansion Programmes of R.A.F., 1934-36⁽⁹⁾
(Bracketed figures in columns 1-4 are numbers of first-line aircraft)

| | Home Defence | Other Units at Home | Total Metropolitan | Overseas | Fleet Air Arm First-Line Aircraft | Total First-Line Aircraft |
|---|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| I. Squadron Establishment as at 1st April 1934 | 42 (484) | 9 (75) | (b) 51 (559) | 23 (253) | 159 aircraft | 971 |
| II. On completion of Programme of Expansion | | | | | | |
| (1) As approved in July 1934 (Stage I) | 75 (884) | 9 (76) | (b) 84 (960) | 27 (292) | (c) 213 aircraft | 1,465 |
| (2) As approved in May 1935 (Stage II) | 112 (1,386) | 11 (126) | (c) 123 (1,512) | 27 (292) | (c) 213 aircraft | 2,017 |
| (3) As approved in February 1936 (Stage III) | (a) 107 (1,568) | 17 (168) | (d) 124 (1,736) | 37 (444) | 504 aircraft | 2,684 |

- (a) 30 fighter squadrons of 14 aircraft each in place of 35 squadrons of 12 aircraft.
- (b) Includes 13 non-regular squadrons.
- (c) Includes 16 non-regular squadrons.
- (d) Includes 20 non-regular squadrons.
- (e) Plus any additional requirements for new construction.

There are two general points to be noted about these programmes so far. The first, which is clearly revealed by the figures themselves, is that home defence was given substantial priority over provision for the Fleet Air Arm and for overseas squadrons.* Ministers said that they were reluctant to reduce the new programmes for the two latter groups suggested by the D.R.C., but claimed that financial limitations made it impossible to satisfy all needs at the same time and that, in giving priority to aircraft for home defence, they were supported in their own views by the general trend of public opinion.⁽¹⁰⁾ Again, although additions to both these latter classes were, as we have seen, approved by the Cabinet as part of Scheme 'F', it was the home defence part of the scheme which was to be completed first and the rest either not until 1942 or as circumstances permitted.⁽¹¹⁾ These air expansion programmes were designed—certainly at this stage of rearmament—primarily to provide 'a striking force against and deterrent to Germany'.⁽¹²⁾ And in this clear emphasis the Chancellor of the Exchequer and those other Ministers who agreed with him differed to some extent, at this stage, from their military advisers. Certainly during the discussions over the first D.R.C. programme in 1933-34 the Air Staff wanted what they considered a more balanced expansion, in which the available money would be spent not only on home defence but also on concurrent provision for the Far East and for the Fleet Air Arm, a point of view which seems to have developed partly from their view that the German menace was then less serious than some Ministers rated it.⁽¹³⁾ This, however, was not a difference of view which survived the rapidly changing awareness of the speed of Germany's air rearmament. There was, perhaps, more persistent disagreement with Mr. Chamberlain's optimistic forecast 'that trained aircraft [sic] [personnel] stationed at home can be transferred at will without further training to the F.A.A.'. [Fleet Air Arm]⁽¹⁴⁾

The second point to be noticed is the relationship between the bomber and fighter aircraft elements in these programmes. Under Scheme 'A', it is true, fighter squadrons were increased to 28 while the bomber force reached only a total of 41 squadrons. At the Cabinet level of discussion, however, there is no evidence to suggest that this relatively substantial increase in fighter strength was due to political pressure. While the need to defend the eastern approaches to Britain was apparent, and hence the increase in fighter strength, there is no reason to suppose that, at this stage, Ministers were pressing for more defence, in the literal sense of the word, and thus anticipating what became their point of view during the last year or so before war broke out.⁽¹⁵⁾

* See above, p. 560.

Schemes 'C' and 'F', however, show a comparatively greater increase in bomber than in fighter strength. The big expansion of May 1935 involved a programme of 70 bomber squadrons as opposed to 35 squadrons of fighters, and in the further expansion of the following February practically all the additional aircraft in the proposed new metropolitan strength were providing the increased establishment of some of the bomber squadrons. As a result, of the total planned metropolitan strength of 1,736 aircraft, 1,022 were to be bombers and 420 fighters. In the memorandum describing these new bomber proposals it was quite clearly implied that, in the view of the Air Staff, 'offensive power' and an 'effective deterrent against German aggression' were one and the same.⁽¹⁶⁾

2. *Financial Stringency: Schemes 'H' and 'J', 1936-37*

It is time to turn back and see how the story unfolded after the adoption of Scheme 'F' in February 1936. That programme, it will be remembered, involved the provision by April 1939 of a total first-line metropolitan strength of 1,736 aircraft, including 1,022 bombers, with adequate war reserves behind them. Two developments occurred, comparatively soon after, both of which made Scheme 'F' (for all its importance and despite the fact that it remained the practical basis for expansion for so long) appear out-of-date almost from its inception. First, it had always been recognised that the capacity of the aircraft industry would be taxed to the utmost to provide the full numbers of aircraft involved within the time specified, and it soon became clear that completion of Scheme 'F' could not, in fact, be achieved until some months after April 1939 unless production facilities were increased. This fact was brought to the notice of the Cabinet in February 1937.⁽¹⁷⁾ Further, not only would the current programme be subject to serious delay but it also gradually became clear that, even when completed, it would still, in the view of the Air Staff, leave Britain in a position of grave inferiority to Germany in air strength. Subsequent to the inception of Scheme 'F' the Air Staff received information which led them to conclude that by April 1939 the German first-line strength would comprise 2,500 aircraft, of which it was estimated that 1,700 would be bombers. In January 1937, therefore, the Air Ministry submitted proposals for raising the first-line strength of the Royal Air Force to approximately 2,500 aircraft, including a total of 1,630 bombers, by April 1939, and for increasing the bomber strength to 1,700 aircraft as soon as possible after that date. These proposals, known as Scheme 'H', involved using reserves in first-line units and the retention at home of certain squadrons previously intended for employment overseas. The object was the creation of an increased deterrent first-line strength in an

apparently larger air striking force, in the near future, while the completion of war reserves for this enlarged first-line strength would be deferred until 1941.⁽¹⁸⁾

It is clear that the Air Staff were far from happy about their proposals. While enabling the R.A.F. 'to put a larger force into the air at the outbreak of war' it was clear to them that the consequence would be a reduced capacity for sustained operations when war began and a measure not to be continued any longer than necessary. Scheme 'H', in other words, was only a temporary expedient to meet a transient situation; a return to 'window-dressing' simply because it seemed impossible, for the time being, to keep pace with the likely enemy. It is hardly surprising therefore, in view of the lukewarm advocacy of the Air Staff for their own proposals, that Ministers remained unconvinced and Scheme 'H' was turned down.

The Secretary of State for Air then put forward a new set of proposals.⁽¹⁹⁾ What impressed him most, Lord Swinton argued, was the fact that Germany could at short notice increase her programme in personnel, aircraft and manufacturing facilities. It was precisely this kind of rapid expansion which Scheme 'H' had been designed to compete with. For that reason he and his advisers considered that what was most important was to concentrate on those items in Scheme 'H' in which, unless action was taken now, it would be impossible to catch up if it later proved to be necessary to put the complete scheme into operation. He therefore made specific proposals for the recruitment of additional categories of personnel, e.g. pilots and skilled tradesmen, whose training could not be improvised at short notice, and also proposals for the requisition and preparation of land for new operational stations. In other words he asked for authority to make preliminary arrangements which would facilitate the carrying out of Scheme 'H' at a later date, should such a scheme be decided upon. These recommendations the Cabinet accepted.⁽²⁰⁾ And thus matters stood throughout the summer of 1937.

In October 1937, however, Lord Swinton submitted another major set of proposals to the D.P.(P) of the C.I.D.^{(21)*} He pointed out that the fears of a greatly enlarged German air force which had inspired the drawing-up of Scheme 'H' had been more than justified since the beginning of the year, and that the Air Staff felt bound to ask yet again for an increase in the current R.A.F. expansion programme in consequence.† The Air Staff now estimated that, by the

* These were the proposals already considered in the particular context of 'parity', above, p. 546.

† It is pointed out from Air Ministry internal evidence that these new proposals by the Air Staff were also partly a reaction to the discovery that the Admiralty and War Office were drawing up their own proposals for greatly increased estimates and that the R.A.F. might find itself short of financial resources unless, it too, quickly staked a larger claim.⁽²²⁾

end of 1939, Germany would have a first-line aircraft strength of 3,240, including 1,458 bombers, and that this force would be backed by reserves and a production capacity adequate for the effective employment of the German air force at full strength in war. The danger implied in this situation was all the greater in that it had been known at least since the beginning of 1937 that the aircraft designed to implement Scheme 'F' (itself a response to an earlier and lesser danger from this anticipated German expansion) would not be fully available until several months after the official completion date of the programme in April 1939. Indeed, the likely situation by December 1939, were Germany to expand her air force at the present estimated rate and the R.A.F. not to be expanded likewise, would be as follows:

| | Great Britain | Germany |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|---------|
| Total first-line | 1,736 | 3,240 |
| Air striking force (i.e. bombers) | 1,022 | 1,458 |

Further, the Air Staff pointed out that Britain's anti-aircraft artillery and searchlight defences would not now be within sight of completion to the approved scale until 1941, and this scale—in the opinion of the Home Defence Sub-Committee—did not itself provide anything like sufficient security, representing less than half the 'Ideal' requirement. In these circumstances it seemed to the Air Staff

'... clear . . . that while we are today in a position of grave inferiority to Germany in effective air strength, the completion of our present programme will not provide an adequate remedy, and that by 1939 we shall still have failed to achieve that equality in Air striking power with Germany which represents the policy of His Majesty's Government. . . .'⁽²³⁾

The new proposals of October 1937 therefore suggested that Britain's minimum requirements for security were a total metropolitan front-line strength of 2,330 aircraft, including an air striking force of 1,442, the whole scheme to be completed by the end of 1939 or as soon after that as possible. This force was to be organised in 154 squadrons, and represented an increase over Scheme 'F' of 22 squadrons (462 aircraft) of bombers, 8 squadrons (112 aircraft) of fighters, and certain percentage increases in squadron establishments. Overseas squadrons were to be increased but only after the completion of home defence requirements.⁽²⁴⁾ So far as the latter were concerned, the Air Staff claimed that 'organisation in 154 squadrons must be regarded as an essential requirement, in order that the full programme, particularly the bomber strength of 1,442 aircraft may

be fulfilled.'⁽²⁵⁾ The outline comparative figures for Scheme 'F' and the new plan, labelled Scheme 'J', were as follows:

Table 17
Aircraft Totals—Comparing Schemes 'F' and 'J', October 1937

| | Scheme 'F' | Scheme 'J' |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Metropolitan Air Force: | | |
| Fighters | 420 | 532 |
| Bombers | 1,022 | 1,442 |
| Other types | 294 | 357 |
| | <hr/> 1,736 | <hr/> 2,331 |
| Overseas | 470 | 644 |
| Trade Defence | — | 56 |
| | <hr/> 2,206 | <hr/> 3,031 ⁽²⁶⁾ |

As has been remarked elsewhere,⁽²⁷⁾ Scheme 'J' and the discussions about it constituted a landmark in the pre-war development of the Royal Air Force. But before considering the most important issue involved, one point in fairness to the Air Staff must be made here. It has sometimes been argued that in the earlier rearmament period, i.e. in the years 1933-35, the Air Ministry as a whole was complacent about the rate of development of the German air force and the adequacy of R.A.F. plans to keep pace with it. That charge cannot fairly be made at least from the planning of Scheme 'F' onwards. Estimates of Germany's capacity to expand and of her intention to do so were by now far from complacent.⁽²⁸⁾ In the covering memorandum in which he explained the need for and the scope of Scheme 'J', Lord Swinton referred to the recent visit of General Milch, Inspector General of the German Air Force to Britain. During that visit General Milch had admitted that the German programme due, originally, to be completed by the autumn of 1938 was, in fact, already complete—an admission which no more than confirmed the Air Staff's independent forecast and progress estimate. Lord Swinton then went on:

'As regards the future, General Milch said that he hoped to use the next year or 18 months in "consolidation". But he at once proceeded to an extensive qualification of this intention. During this period Germany "might increase the strength of squadrons from 12 to 15 or 18 aircraft". This in itself would constitute a 50 per cent expansion of the Force. He further added: "General Goering is a man of big ideas and somewhat American in his outlook; and he might suddenly say 'Double the Air Force'. If that happened I should have to carry out his orders."

General Milch promised that if an expansion of either kind took place, we should be informed. Judging by the past, I cannot place much reliance on this undertaking; and I think the information would be given after and not before the event; or at best when considerable progress had been made. Moreover, the fact that General Milch referred to doubling the Air Force in the way he did convinces me that this is already planned, though the date of execution may be uncertain. It will be observed that the doubling of the Force corresponds exactly with the forecast of the Air Staff in the attached Memorandum. In all the circumstances I do not feel that we can safely count on a German expansion less than that which General Milch has envisaged as possible, and which the Air Staff regard as probable.⁽²⁹⁾

To return to Scheme 'J'. The emphasis, particularly from the point of view of the Air Staff, was still on the basic necessity for an adequate metropolitan offensive force—i.e. bombers. Quite considerable overseas expansion was recommended, but only as a second priority. Again, both Minister and Air Staff emphasised the inadequacy of offensive force without adequate defences. 'It would be a most dangerous mistake', they wrote, 'to measure relative air strengths in terms of military aircraft alone, and to ignore the vitally important factor of relative vulnerability.'⁽³⁰⁾ But where aircraft were concerned the bomber force was given clear pride of place. Bomber Command was to be increased by 40 per cent in numbers alone and Fighter Command by 25 per cent. And this numerical comparison takes no account of the fact that paper plans were now actively being made within the Air Ministry to incorporate the new heavy four-engined machines into the bomber force.^{(31)*}

Further, the Air Ministry memorandum in no way obscured the fact that since existing approved programmes were going to be extremely difficult to complete by 1939, then any expanded programmes were even more doubtful on the basis of the current methods of deploying manpower and industrial capacity. The Air Staff argued that the time had now come to reconsider the Cabinet decision that the reconditioning of the Services was to be carried out without interference with normal trade.† The Secretary of State for Air more cautiously assumed that the current assumption of 'business as usual' would be maintained. But he assured his Cabinet colleagues, if his assumption was correct, then two conclusions followed. On the material side, Scheme 'J' could be implemented and then only for

* This particular development was not brought to the attention of Ministers either by the Air Staff or by the Secretary of State for Air when Scheme 'J' was first put forward. Nor did the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence raise it in his detailed and critical reply to the Air Ministry's proposals.⁽³²⁾

† See above, p. 303.

the Metropolitan air force, by the summer of 1941 at the earliest; and on the personnel side even that partial programme was impossible by that same date.

Finally, from the above the Air Staff drew certain conclusions which the Secretary of State for Air passed on to his Cabinet colleagues but on which he made no comment. If everything that contributed to national defence could not be done then, commented the Air Staff, they wished—

‘. . . to express most strongly the supreme importance of concentrating all our energies in the spheres of finance, industry and manpower, first on those components of our defensive system which are really vital to our existence. It is manifestly vital that our Navy should be fully adequate to ensure that the arteries of the Empire remain uncut, and that the United Kingdom—by which the Empire stands and falls—is not defeated by lack of food or of those essential raw materials for which we depend upon our sea-borne trade. It is today no less vital that our Air Force and the anti-aircraft units of the Army should be fully adequate to secure this country against what is, after all, the only form of attack which, failing adequate defences, may be decisive in a matter of weeks. . . . It is difficult indeed to see (even assuming the most drastic degree of State intervention and control) how a standard of air strength, as expressed particularly in terms of aircraft and other forms of material which would be necessary to provide any adequate military deterrent against the risk of attack by Germany, could be attained as early as 1939, by which year it is assumed that Germany might be in a position to strike. But this fact affords no reason for our failing to take every possible further measure to bridge this gap, and the Air Staff strongly represent the desirability of the large programme being approved and of every effort being made to complete it as soon after 1939 as possible.’⁽³³⁾

It will be remembered that the appreciation just summarised had been prepared as part of the process by which the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence sought to unify all the Service programmes upon a stabilised time and financial basis.* And it was in the light of this approach that the Minister made his criticisms of Scheme ‘J’.⁽³⁴⁾ In effect, what he demanded was that Air Force expenditure during the quinquennium 1938-43 should not increase by more than £110 million over the total already sanctioned under Scheme ‘F’, whereas the estimated increased cost of Scheme ‘J’ was of the order of £270 million.⁽³⁵⁾ Savings, he suggested, could be made in two ways. First by concentrating on increases in the Metropolitan air force and thus sacrificing any further increases in the overseas

* See above, Chapter VIII.

forces. Second, by providing some increase in the current first-line strength of the bomber squadrons of the metropolitan air force, but on far less ambitious a scale than that contemplated in Scheme 'J'. Moreover, coupled with this would be reduced provision for reserves, but improved arrangements for war-potential.

We have already examined, to some extent, the arguments by which Sir Thomas Inskip sought to justify his views.* Quite apart from financial restrictions the Minister claimed that, since the German aircraft industry was more extensive than its British counterpart, and since the German air force had already gained a lead, 'it seems unlikely that it is possible for us to attain parity with the German Air Force not merely in first-line strength, but also in war reserves and war potential'.⁽³⁶⁾ In any case, parity of the sort carried out by the Air Staff was not necessary. In the pre-war stage deterrence did not necessarily imply equality. If deterrence failed and war broke out, then the main object should be the defence of Britain herself and that implied a very high priority for fighter defence. Indeed, it is clear that the Minister was by now envisaging a long-term traditional strategy by which Britain would begin a war less well prepared than her enemies and would expect, first, to act defensively to protect herself against air attack and perhaps even invasion, and also to secure her sea routes; during that time she would then turn over to a war economy before attempting to take the offensive. And in this his views tallied with those of the Prime Minister and most of the other members of the Cabinet.

When the Cabinet met on 22nd December it was decided, after a lengthy discussion, to authorise the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence to go ahead, broadly on the basis of his own proposals and in consultation with the Secretary of State for Air.⁽³⁷⁾ This meant rejection of any increases in overseas forces for the present;† concentration, within the metropolitan force, on increases in the fighter squadrons; and for the moment, no decision either to reorganise the bomber force with increased first-line strength and fewer reserves, or to maintain present first-line strength and more reserves.‡ In other words, Scheme 'J' was, for the most part, decisively rejected. In the financial climate of late 1937 this was almost inevitable. It was, nonetheless, unfortunate since Scheme 'J' was in many ways one of the best of all the pre-war expansion schemes, whether of those put into operation or those which were rejected. It was based

* See above, pp. 282-85.

† At this meeting Lord Swinton explicitly agreed that the original overseas provisions of Scheme 'J' must be sacrificed, since the key to Britain's own security problem was Germany.

‡ The issue of heavy *versus* medium and light bombers favoured some increase in bomber first-line strength, not reduced provision for reserves. This issue does not appear to have been raised at this particular Cabinet meeting.⁽³⁸⁾

on a full appreciation of German strength and intentions as well as of non-European requirements; it strengthened both first-line and reserve forces; and it made the vitally important proposal that the policy governing the production capacity of the aircraft industry should be reconsidered. Its main weakness was that, failing acceptance of radical change in production and recruitment methods, it would not be completed until the summer of 1941. Had it been accepted and, as part of it, the more forward-looking programme of construction, recruitment and training which the Air Staff wanted, then Scheme 'J' might well have been complete by the spring of 1940, with all the implications for the fighting of the summer and autumn of that year which come easily to mind. It should, however, be remembered that there was a basic problem affecting the implementation of an expansion programme as ambitious as Scheme 'J' of which the Air Staff were well aware but which does not seem to have been mentioned in Ministerial discussions. The problem was that, in the early months of 1938, operational Commands of the R.A.F. were faced, as they had not previously been, with the need to round off the training of crews coming out of the training schools; quality was tending to be affected by the speeding up in the training school processes, leaving more finishing off to be done in squadron service. Moreover, expansion demanded that an increasing number of very experienced pilots were needed as instructors. All of this meant that, on the one hand the training organisation found great difficulty in increasing output sufficiently quickly while, on the other, operational Commands considered themselves less rather than more ready for war. Ideally the R.A.F. needed a period of steady growth for safe consolidation. The need to keep up with Germany made such a period impossible.

Because of the vital importance of the problem of manpower in relation to all aspects of R.A.F. expansion it is worth while digressing briefly to examine it in rather more detail. In 1934 the regular establishment of the R.A.F. was 31,000 officers and men; in the Estimates for 1938-39 the total had risen to 83,000. In fact, in the three years 1935 to 1938 the average annual intake was 1,500 pilots and 13,000 airmen and boys, compared with an average pre-expansion entry of 300 pilots and 1,600 airmen. The actual manpower strength of the R.A.F. on 1st September 1939 was approximately 118,000 of all ranks, backed by reserves of about 45,000. Nonetheless, the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Kingsley Wood, warned the Cabinet in late October 1938 that the most serious limiting factor on the number of squadrons which could be mobilised by the beginning of 1940 would not be the production of aircraft, but the provision of trained crews to man them, particularly in the reserve.⁽³⁹⁾

The Air Staff had long been aware of the need for reserves of aircrews, and steps had been taken well before the outbreak of war to provide resources in addition to the regular establishment and reserves. In 1924 the Auxiliary Air Force and the Special Reserve were created, originally designed as a home defence air force. The former made up their squadrons out of volunteer personnel assisted by a nucleus of regulars, while the latter consisted of squadrons composed from the outset half of regulars and half of non-regulars. Of the five Special Reserve squadrons so formed—Nos. 500-504—four eventually became Auxiliary Reserve Squadrons, and one—No. 503—was disbanded. There were eight Auxiliary squadrons in 1934, and twenty by the outbreak of war. Moreover, with the acquisition of a number of balloon squadrons, this Auxiliary Reserve numbered well over 20,000 officers and men by September 1939.

A second non-regular reserve force, the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, was announced in the summer of 1936 and began training in early 1937. The new force was deliberately kept separate from the Auxiliary Air Force and did not form into units of its own. It was designed to appeal to young men of all classes, particularly from cities and industrial centres, who were willing to enter into the Reserve as airmen, pilots or observers, and to train in their spare time and at a summer camp. By September 1939 there were over forty training centres in operation and the pilot strength of the Reserve totalled more than 2,500.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The Auxiliary Air Force and the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve proved their worth from the beginning of the war onwards and not least in the Battle of Britain. What is being stressed here, however, is not the fine war-time record of these forces, but the fact that their success was bound to involve yet a further demand on precious resources already in short supply particularly on machines and instructors—in the years of peace.

One final point arising out of these discussions at the end of 1937 is worth mentioning before we go on to consider later programmes. It will be remembered that the Cabinet meeting at which Scheme 'J' was rejected—except mainly, in regard to its fighter aircraft proposals—was also the meeting at which it was firmly decided that help to allies, the 'continental commitment', should rank lowest on the Army's list of priorities.* The military reasons for the Army decision were that the Maginot Line was a strong defence calling for comparatively limited manpower, and that the French neither did nor should expect more than two divisions at most from a Britain already bearing her full share of responsibility at sea and in the air.

* See above, pp. 470-72.

On the reverse side of the coin the Air Staff, in their explanatory memorandum for Scheme 'J', had themselves looked at the matter of possible assistance from the French in the air as one reason to modify Britain's needs for equality with Germany in air striking power. Their conclusion was that 'the war potential of the French Air Force is, for the present, reduced in a most grave manner', and that that state of affairs might not be remedied for some time to come. Germany could, in fact, attack France on land with adequate land, and crippling air support and launch a major air attack on the United Kingdom at the same time. Therefore the full expansion programme of Scheme 'J' was necessary. Now, in December 1937, the Cabinet not only accepted the claim that the French would get little help from Britain on land; they were proposing to reduce Britain's air contribution at the same time. This point seems to have impressed the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, at the Cabinet meetings on 22nd December. He was willing, though reluctantly, to accept the new order of priorities for the Army; but he urged on his colleagues that the French be informed, and also that the possibilities of a German invasion of Belgium be fully considered. It was important that France and Britain should consider together how their two countries were to be defended. He then continued, leaving the impression that the two thoughts were connected in his mind, that the strength of the Royal Air Force was of first importance from the international point of view (as the recent Milch visit had confirmed) and that, from that point of view, he would like to see Scheme 'J' adopted for bombers as well as for fighters. Britain, he argued, was adopting too completely a defensive strategy and, as part of that process, the Cabinet was now proposing to deprive the Royal Air Force of part of its offensive power.

In fact, neither France nor the United Kingdom had asked for or accepted clear alliance obligations at this stage. Nonetheless, if it was right to limit the Army's commitments at least partly on the assumption of a common strategic approach on the part of France and the United Kingdom, whereby France would accept a far greater responsibility on land, then it was equally right to consider how far our own air strategy fitted such a common plan. The Cabinet, however, did not at any time discuss Scheme 'J' from that point of view.

3. *Schemes 'K' and 'L', 1938*

In reframing their proposals to conform with the Cabinet's decision of 22nd December 1937 the Air Staff reiterated that the rejected Scheme 'J', which would have cost about £650 million over the five-year period 1937-41, still represented, in their view, 'the minimum strength required to provide a reasonable standard of security

in the present international situation'. It had planned, they considered, for 'an air force which would form an effective deterrent and insurance of peace, and which, in the unhappy event of war, would be able to meet a potential enemy on equal terms'.⁽⁴¹⁾ With this in mind, it was not surprising that, while reframing their plans, the Air Staff also took what was, to them, the more acceptable interpretation of the most important matter on which the Cabinet's conclusions had been reserved, i.e. the details of the first-line strength and of the reserves of the bomber force. Their revised scheme, Scheme 'K', while incorporating the recommendations that overseas increases should be omitted, and that Scheme 'J' fighter increases should be retained with full war reserves, also included an increase in bomber strength above the previously approved scale (Scheme 'F'), by means of reduced war reserves and an increased war potential. In justifying this last item the Air Staff argued that the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence himself had expressed a preference for such a step as against lower first-line strength and increased reserves; this view the Air Staff had interpreted to be a recommendation that they should now propose such increases in the R.A.F. bomber force as 'would correspond to that proportion of the expansion of the German Air Force which they are morally sure is already in course of being effected, leaving out of account for the present the anticipated German long-term programme'.⁽⁴²⁾ Such a proportion in terms of bombers, was claimed to be 1,350. This produced new comparative figures for R.A.F. expansion programmes as follows:

Table 18
First-Line Strength of Metropolitan Aircraft—Schemes 'F', 'J' and 'K' in 1938

| | Scheme 'F' | Scheme 'J' | Scheme 'K' |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Fighters | 420 | 532 | 532 |
| Bombers | 1,022 | 1,442 | 1,350 |
| General Reconnaissance | 126 | 189 | 189 |
| Army Co-operation | 132 | 132 | 132 |
| Flying-Boats | 36 | 36 | 36 |
| Additional for Trade Protection | | 56 | 56 |
| Totals | 1,736 | 2,387 | 2,295 ⁽⁴³⁾ |

Scheme 'K' was a makeshift, the best that could be done with the money available. Like Scheme 'J' it represented a time lag in com-

parison with estimated German programmes, only rather more so, and it was suspect in its inadequate provision for reserves. It represented, according to an Air Staff memorandum of January 1938, a programme 'framed for the completion of the first-line requirements, with part reserves, by the end of the financial year 1940-41, whilst the remainder of the reserves should become available, with a few exceptions about mid-way through the following year'.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In other words, with estimated wastage in war, losses would not have been fully replaced from reserves until mid-1942. It is hardly surprising that the scheme was criticised by the Air Staff themselves as 'not even the minimum insurance which they considered necessary in the Metropolitan force'.⁽⁴⁵⁾ In face of that verdict it is doubtful whether even economy-minded Ministers could have accepted it. The estimated cost of Scheme 'K' was £567.5 million* for the five years 1937-41 and exceeded the Air Force portion of the grand total of £1,650 million which the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was currently arguing was the most that the country should spend on its rearmament programmes during the period under review.⁽⁴⁶⁾† The Minister therefore began negotiations with the Secretary of State for Air for a yet cheaper programme, proposing further reductions of about £60 million over the five-year period, despite the clear statement by the Air Staff that even Scheme 'K' did not provide adequate reserves or war potential.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Before, however, the Secretary of State for Air and the Air Staff could comply with these new instructions the whole situation was put in the melting pot by the German annexation of Austria. At their meeting on 14th March 1938, when the implications of this move came under urgent consideration, the Cabinet took another look at the long-term proposals of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence and considered what further defence measures were desirable and possible in the near future.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In response to this new sense of urgency the Secretary of State for Air duly submitted a plan, Scheme 'L', which was in fact an acceleration of the already rejected Scheme 'K'.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Scheme 'L' provided for a first-line bomber strength of 1,320 and a fighter strength of 608 aircraft, with a total metropolitan first-line strength of 2,182 machines by March 1939. Full reserves would be provided, approximately at any rate, by March 1940, although results would be possible only if labour and materials were forthcoming. Briefly, in other words, Scheme 'L' was simply Scheme 'K' brought forward by a year, so that the major part of the programme would be completed by March 1940 instead of March 1941.

* i.e. as against £650 million for Scheme 'J'.

† The proposals of the Minister were approved by the Cabinet on 16th February 1938.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The Secretary of State for Air estimated that the cost of the new scheme would be roughly that of Scheme 'K', i.e. £567 million over five years, a figure which the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had recently argued was well above the proper sum which should be allocated to the Royal Air Force; indeed the latter had said that the cost of Scheme 'K', if accepted, would 'wreck' the financial limits the Government had set itself for its rearmament programmes. He now repeated his warning. He submitted that, with Scheme 'L', the choice lay between a plan which, if accepted, would greatly increase the difficulty of keeping to already agreed limits on expenditure and, if rejected, would mean acting against the considered views of the Air Staff on the necessary minimum of air rearmament to provide reasonable safety. He then continued:

'I should regret very much any decision which threw into the melting pot the whole question of defence expenditure. It is important in my submission to maintain the Cabinet's decision as far as at all possible. The addition above proposed . . . will not I hope, if approved, be regarded as reopening the Cabinet's decision as to the sum available. The provisional allocations to the defence departments will still have to be settled on the basis of the sum already approved together with any addition involved in the approval of the present proposals of the Secretary of State for Air.'⁽⁵¹⁾

The Minister's arguments were strongly backed up by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon.⁽⁵²⁾ The latter argued along two lines. First, financial. The Cabinet had recently agreed to a certain total as being the maximum figure available (based on current Estimates) for defence over the next five years. True, in a statement to the House of Commons on 24th March, the Prime Minister had admitted that, in the light of recent international events, further efforts must be devoted to increasing production and 'accelerating the completion of the rearmament programme'. Further, Chamberlain had then gone on to say that there would have to be 'an increase in some parts of the Programme, especially in that of the Royal Air Force and Anti-Aircraft defences'.⁽⁵³⁾ But Simon claimed he, at any rate, had never understood the Prime Minister's statement to mean the abandonment of the overall financial limits decided upon by the Cabinet in February; acceleration of the rearmament programme need not necessarily involve any substantial increase in cost, although it might lead to expenditure being incurred in an earlier rather than in a later year.

'As I see the matter', he wrote, 'what is required in order to carry out the policy implicit in the Prime Minister's announcement to

Parliament on the 24th March, is a programme for accelerating the completion of the existing Air Force Programme, together with some increase in the first-line strength. The need for such increase, (particularly in fighters), was recognised . . . and I accept it. This should not involve "wrecking" the financial limitations adopted by the Cabinet six weeks ago,* though I recognise that whatever scheme is agreed to now is not necessarily final, and that the Air Programme, like the rest of the Defence Programmes, will again be subject to review.

In my view, therefore, the degree of expansion now authorised should be considerably less than that asked for by the Secretary for Air, but the scheme now authorised should be so planned as to permit of further expansion if, at a later date, this should be deemed necessary.¹⁽⁵⁴⁾

The Chancellor's second objection to the degree of expansion involved in Scheme 'L' concerned production facilities, particularly in terms of labour. Scheme 'L' would involve the placing in the immediate future of the very large contracts necessary for the attainment of the proposed first-line strength and scale of reserves. This was planned to be completed in two stages, by March 1940 and then by March 1941.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Could this, in fact, be done? The Air Ministry's assumption, so the Chancellor argued, was that the additional labour force required—estimated to be of the order of 100,000—was obtainable at the dates and in the numbers necessary. But, at the present time, there was not any assurance that such a large increase in the labour force could be found; in that case the carrying out of the new programme might well extend over a far longer period than 2-3 years. In any case, with the successive schemes for the expansion of the R.A.F. of the past three years the figure given for first-line strength so far attained was substantially larger than the mobilisation strength, while reserves behind the existing first-line strength were well below the standard being aimed at.⁽⁵⁶⁾ All this made it seem doubtful to the Chancellor whether the correct course, now, was for the Air Ministry to be authorised to place orders and incur commitments in a scheme foreshadowing so large an expansion of first-line strength, rather than concentrating on improving the readiness for war of the force already authorised and building up reserves behind the first-line.

'We ought, I think', wrote the Chancellor, 'most seriously to consider whether the sounder and more business-like plan is not that we should now organise a smaller degree of expansion, within the limits of the resources which are in sight; while at the same time making plans so that, if at a later date further additions

* Author's note: i.e. in February, and this memorandum is dated 4th April 1938.

are decided upon, these additions can be easily fitted into the scheme originally approved.'⁽⁵⁷⁾

Not the least important feature of Scheme 'L' was that it brought to a head some fundamental differences between the Chancellor and most of his Cabinet colleagues on the one hand and the Air Ministry on the other. Broadly, the point of view of the latter was that the problems set out by the Chancellor could be solved provided the Government was willing to adopt a new outlook and new methods. Lord Swinton, the Secretary of State for Air, had himself already estimated that a very much larger labour force was needed, that the force could be raised, and that the aircraft industry, including the shadow factories, had already been extended and equipped on a scale to make it possible to absorb such an increase in labour. The Air Staff, too, thought that men could be found for both factories and the R.A.F. if only the Government at last decided to interfere with the normal course of trade.⁽⁵⁸⁾* Moreover, despite their confidence, the Secretary of State and the Air Staff did not in any way blind the eyes of Ministers to the problem of sheer size involved in Scheme 'L'; for the first time, in fact, some of the basic difficulties of manpower and training seem to have been spelled out in detail.⁽⁶⁰⁾ For example, it would be necessary, in order to provide the pilots for Scheme 'L' by 1940, to achieve an annual output of 2,500 during 1939; since 1935 the training schools, annual output had not exceeded 1,500. Moreover, a monthly output of 1,800 aircraft, over 1,100 pilots and 1,400 other aircrew would be needed to sustain Scheme 'L' in war.⁽⁶¹⁾

These various proposals and counter-proposals were referred by the Cabinet to a small group consisting of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence and the Secretary of State for Air.⁽⁶²⁾ This small group, in consultation with industry, undertook as its main task an assessment of the maximum output of aircraft which could be obtained within the two years up to 31st March 1940. They then reported back to the full Cabinet on 27th April 1938. Their estimate was that approximately 4,000 aircraft could be turned out by 31st March 1939, and a further 8,000 aircraft by 31st March 1940.† That was exclusive of the possibility of the purchases from America of special types. In other words, it ought to be possible substantially to achieve the first two years total of aircraft involved in Scheme 'L' by March 1940. This accelerated and increased production compared with an estimated output of approximately 7,500 aircraft within the programme authorised hitherto and

* See above, p. 303. The decision, in principle, to interfere with the normal course of trade was, in fact, taken by the Cabinet on 22nd March 1938.⁽⁵⁹⁾

† See above, p. 550.

working under normal conditions. No difficulty was anticipated with premises and plant. Labour was a thornier problem, but the firms concerned were prepared to go all out in terms of both recruitment and shift work. Finally, in order that the specific authority might be obtained for all action necessary to give effect to the expanded and accelerated programme, the Chancellor agreed that a Treasury officer with full financial authority should sit in with the Air Ministry. In the Air Ministry itself a special committee, with outside industrial participation, was charged with giving immediate effect to the programme.

In presenting these proposals to the Cabinet the Prime Minister said that, on the production side, he hoped the new arrangements would provide an answer to those inside and outside Parliament who had been criticising both the Government and the aircraft firms. On the side of policy he said that the next two years looked like being the most critical period, and the main thing was to get maximum production during that time. He would rather not relate the production figures now suggested to any particular programme, but consider them as the most optimistic estimate that the firms involved could give on the assumption that all went well. Towards the end of the discussion the Secretary of State for Air was asked whether it would be possible to get better value for money by providing more fighters and fewer bombers. Not only were fighters probably available in greater numbers as being smaller and cheaper but, so the Foreign Secretary claimed, the principal deterrent to the enemy's bombers. Lord Swinton's reply to this—apart from reminding Ministers that the number of fighters being planned for was based on an estimate of the number of enemy bombers which could reach this country—was that the current fighter programme would in any case occupy the whole of the capacity of the industry available for that purpose. At the end of its deliberations the Cabinet followed the line suggested by the Prime Minister and his small Committee, and agreed to authorise the Air Ministry to accept as many aircraft as they could obtain up to a maximum of 12,000 machines during the next two years.⁽⁶³⁾

The main interest of Scheme 'L'—for, very roughly, that was in fact the plan now in operation—is that it was a plan fitted into the maximum estimated productive capacity of the aircraft industry, and designed on a more urgent basis than that of the former practice of 'business as usual'. Whatever the resistance of the Chancellor and of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, resistance with the object of maintaining an already agreed financial ceiling, aircraft expansion plans for the immediate future were now based on what could be made and bought, and not on the amount of money available for buying. However modest the change may seem to a later

generation, the fact was that a breach had been made in the long established methods of Treasury Control, in spirit if not altogether in practice. The gathering momentum of rearmament was becoming clearer within the Government even if less so outside.*

Despite all this, Scheme 'L' should not be presented in too rosy a light. In the first place, since it was little more than the accelerated version of Scheme 'K', it suffered from most of the latter scheme's defects. In the memorandum dated 4th April 1938 the Air Staff made it clear that the new scheme fell below the level of safety which they considered necessary. Those conditions would be satisfied only if the metropolitan air force:

- (a) included a striking force of at least equal strength at any given time to Germany's;
- (b) included a fighter force reasonably adequate to deal with enemy bombers, regard being had to the effects of the operations of the striking force in reducing the scale of attack on us;
- (c) included a sufficient war reserve of aircraft, equipment and trained personnel, backed by a fully adequate war productive capacity both for aircraft and trained personnel, to enable the first-line force to continue operations on the required scale of intensity;
- (d) had a secure base, with adequate anti-aircraft defences and searchlights; and
- (e) was supplemented by a thorough A.R.P. organisation.

Scheme 'J' met these conditions and had been rejected for financial reasons. Scheme 'L' did not. In framing the terms of the latter, so the Air Staff pointed out, they had felt bound to relate our own bomber strength to some specific German figure; they had adopted the figure for mid-1938, i.e. 1,350 bombers, and not the figure at which it was believed Germany ultimately aimed. In other words, the new scheme was, from the start, two years behind the German programme.⁽⁶⁴⁾

'The fact remains', the Air Staff stated, 'that we are endeavouring to compete with a nation of 70 million people whose whole manpower and industrial capacity had been in effect on a basis of national mobilisation for the past four years. And the Air Staff would be failing in their duty were they not to make quite clear the manner and extent to which even the accelerated programme in Scheme "L" falls below what they regard as the level of safety.'

* See above, p. 315.

It was clearly an awareness of this shortcoming which prompted much of the criticism of the new plans both in the press and in Parliament. There was a full-dress debate on the subject of air rearmament in both Houses on 12th May 1938. In each the Government was comfortably successful. But, in each, harsh accusations were made that promises of parity were no longer being even considered, let alone kept.⁽⁶⁵⁾* And only four days later it was announced that Lord Swinton had resigned as Secretary of State for Air and had been succeeded by Sir Kingsley Wood.[†]

The second drawback to Scheme 'L' was that the production estimates on which it was based were unduly optimistic. By the time Scheme 'L' was agreed to, the developments of recent years, and particularly the forward planning arrangements introduced by Lord Swinton during his tenure of office at the Air Ministry, had led to a situation in which there was adequate machinery and floor space for current air expansion programmes. Shortages now, and they were acute, were in some materials but most of all in the supply of labour. The labour force in the aircraft industry had risen from 30,000 in 1935 to 60,000 in the summer of 1938; but, as a survey carried out at that later date disclosed, the total would have to rise to about 180,000 in January 1939 if current programmes were to be completed in time. In the months immediately after the agreement to implement Scheme 'L' labour recruitment in the industry lagged well behind forecasts leading to under-production of about 30 per cent each month.⁽⁶⁷⁾ And even in May 1939 the industry's total labour force was still less than 130,000.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Little wonder that, even when formulating the details for Scheme 'L' the Air Staff commented:⁽⁶⁹⁾

'Our air expansion has been based on the voluntary system and on the principle of non-interference with the normal flow of trade. The latter principle has just been abandoned;‡ but we are still one year short of the date on which the present approved programme (Scheme F) is due for completion, and actually we are for a variety of reasons behind schedule even for that

* The figures of German and British production capacity and aircraft strengths, produced by critics, were certainly not all accurate.

† Lord Weir, who had been adviser on aircraft production at the Air Ministry since May 1935, resigned at the same time. Writing many years later Lord Swinton said that, in the circumstances, his dismissal from office 'was not unnatural'. It was, nevertheless, an unfortunate break in continuity even though it opened the way to have the Secretary of State for Air in the House of Commons.⁽⁶⁶⁾

‡ The reference is to the Cabinet decision of 22nd March 1938, as the result of which double shifts could be worked in the aircraft industry and peace-time factories diverted to war requirements. Even six months later, however, many of the aircraft firms were working neither night-shifts nor overtime; at an Expansion Progress Meeting on 14th September 1938 it was decided to press them to do so.⁽⁷⁰⁾

scheme. And—short of national mobilisation on German lines—there is little we can do to improve our standard of war production within the next few dangerous months.’⁽⁷¹⁾

4. *Munich to September 1939: Scheme ‘M’*

Immediately after the Munich crisis a wholesale investigation into the country’s defences, active and passive, at home and abroad, was set on foot. As part of that process the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Kingsley Wood, was instructed by the C.I.D. to prepare a memorandum on the relative air strengths, existing and prospective, of the United Kingdom and certain other Powers—including Germany. In addition he was to set out the further steps necessary for improving the United Kingdom’s position in these matters.⁽⁷²⁾* Sir Kingsley Wood’s memorandum then became part of a general inquiry into the whole range of defence programmes, and possible acceleration of them, undertaken at this same time by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence.⁽⁷³⁾

The memorandum of the Secretary of State for Air warned his colleagues that ‘we must make every effort to escape from the position in which we found ourselves during the recent crisis, when we had less than one week’s reserves behind the squadrons’, involving a risk of ‘a rapidly declining scale of effort, especially in the fighter squadrons’. Sir Kingsley Wood further reminded his colleagues of their decision, of the previous April, to accept up to 12,000 aircraft during the two years up to March 1940. Assuming that the necessary labour was forthcoming, and we have already seen that it was not, then this programme would make possible by March 1940 a metropolitan first-line strength of 2,370 aircraft, an overseas strength of 490, with in each case the necessary reserves. But, he also reminded them, the decision taken by the Cabinet in April had been ‘dictated mainly by what were then considered to be the limitations of aircraft production and was not related to the possible German air strength by the date when it was due for completion’. As a guide to future action it was desirable to be able to compare the strength of our own air force with that of foreign powers at some future date; and since it was a matter of years before a new programme, once started, could be fully implemented, a comparison at a near date alone would not be of much value. On the other hand, there was bound to be a margin of error in forecasting future strengths of other Powers, a margin likely to increase with the length of time involved. And so Sir Kingsley Wood gave his colleagues estimates up to April 1940, represented in the following tables:

* See also above, pp. 551-52.

Table 19
Estimates of Future Aircraft Strengths
'I. Aircraft Totals (including Ship-borne Aircraft): Comparison between Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia-in-Europe: April 1939-April 1940

| | Present | | 1st April 1939 | | 1st August 1939 | | 1st April 1940 | |
|---|------------|----------|----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| | First-Line | Re-serve | First-Line | Re-serve | First-Line | Re-serve | First-Line | Re-serve |
| Great Britain (Metropolitan) | 1,606 | 412 | 1,782 | 977 | 1,890 | 1,502 | 2,381 | 3,428 |
| France (a) (Metropolitan and Mediterranean) | 1,454 | 730 | 1,660 | 830 | 1,770 | 900 | 2,290 | 1,150 |
| Germany | 3,200 | 2,400 | 3,680 | 2,750 | 4,030 | 3,000 | 4,540 | 3,400 |
| Italy (Metropolitan and Mediterranean) | 1,810 | 360 | 1,900 (b) | 480 | 1,900 (b) | 650 | 1,900 (b) | 800 |
| Russia (West of Lake Baikal) | 3,280 (c) | 1,640 | 3,280 | 1,300 | 3,280 | 1,300 | 3,500 | 1,050 |

(a) The existing French programme is due for completion at the beginning of 1940, and the figures assume that it will be not less than one year late in fulfilment. The programme provides for 100 per cent reserves, but our estimate, related to the industrial prospect, allows for only 50 per cent.
(b) These figures include the Italian Air Legion in Spain, and presume that the reduction of that force in the future will be matched by an increase in the Home strength. It is expected that the announced programme for Italian strength will not be appreciably exceeded, and that any additional capacity for expansion will be used to augment reserves.
(c) Includes 800 obsolete bombers. 60 per cent of the Russian air force is obsolete.

II. Situation at 1st April 1940, by Classes of Aircraft: Comparison of Major European Powers

| | First-Line | Reserves |
|----------------------------|------------|----------|
| British (a)— | | |
| Bombers (Long-Range) (b) | 1,352 | 1,953 |
| Fighters | 640 | 1,131 |
| General Reconnaissance (c) | 281 | 219 |
| Army Co-operation | 108 | 125 |
| | 2,381 | 3,428 |
| German— | | |
| Bombers (Long-Range) (b) | 2,050 | 1,550 |
| Dive Bombers (Short-Range) | 430 | 300 |
| Fighters | 1,320 | 1,000 |
| Long-Reconnaissance | 300 | 225 |
| Short-Reconnaissance | 300 | 225 |
| Naval Co-operation | 140 | 100 |
| | 4,540 | 3,400 |

- (a) By 1st April 1940 the extra regular crews . . . should be complete for our fighters, but will not be available in the bomber squadrons till later in the year.
- (b) Long-range bombers are defined as those capable of attacking England from bases on German soil and vice versa.
- (c) Includes shore-based aircraft employed in co-operation with the Navy.

III. *Estimated Monthly Output of Military Aircraft: Comparison of Major European Powers*

| | <i>Present*</i> | <i>1.4.39</i> | <i>1.8.39</i> | <i>1.4.40</i> |
|---------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Germany | 600 | 700 | 800 | 900 |
| Italy | 200 | 225 | 250 | 300 |
| France | 120 | 150 | 200 | 300 |
| Russia | 470 | 480 | 490 | 500 |

In answering the German challenge Sir Kingsley Wood emphasised that the expansion of our air strength must be based on the adequate provision of reserves of aircraft and trained personnel, and that first-line strength in war would be limited by those factors. Until such reserves were provided—and the difficulty was greatest with personnel—it would continue to be necessary to ‘roll-up’ a proportion of first-line bomber squadrons on mobilisation in order to provide the minimum essential reserve.

‘It is obvious’, he wrote, ‘that if our war effort in the air is not to decline rapidly from the outset, we must have adequate reserves both of aircraft and personnel. The calculation of what we require in these respects for a future war is based on a number of factors, many of which are almost entirely conjectural. We have, for instance, no experience of air operations on a modern scale between two first-class Powers . . . Nor can we assess with any certainty the rate of production of modern aircraft or of highly trained crews under war conditions. . . . A detailed review of our requirements which has recently been completed has, however, made clear, first, that the period before the industry can overtake our anticipated rates of wastage in highly complex modern aircraft will at least be considerably longer than we had estimated: and, secondly, that our requirements in trained reserve crews in peace and from the war training organisation in war will be of a very high order, to meet which it will be necessary to adopt special measures on the lines indicated later in this paper.

The future expansion of our air strength must therefore, it is submitted, be based on the provision of adequate reserves of aircraft and trained personnel; and the rate at which we can

* October 1938.

increase the proportion of our first-line squadrons that can be operated in war will be conditioned by that factor.'⁽⁷⁴⁾

This statement represented an important change of approach to R.A.F. expansion, at any rate on the part of Ministers. It has already been pointed out^{(75)*} that, back at the beginning of 1938, the Air Staff were aware that a policy of combined first-line strength and war potential, at the expense of reserves, might well prove disastrous in war, since wastage would bring operations to a halt before potential could be developed—even if it were not already destroyed by enemy operations. It does not appear that Lord Swinton, at that time Secretary of State for Air, put this view sufficiently explicitly to his colleagues in the Cabinet; the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, in December 1937, certainly preferred a policy of reduced reserves combined with a large increase in war potential⁽⁷⁶⁾ and his preference was, equally certainly, based at least partly on financial grounds.⁽⁷⁷⁾

Sir Kingsley Wood's detailed proposals based on this analysis were as follows. First, top priority for fighter aircraft.

'We cannot assume', he wrote, 'that we shall not have to go to war before our programme is completed in every respect, but must take into account the possibility of another crisis occurring at any time within the next two years. We must face the facts that our ground anti-aircraft defences, guns, searchlights and balloons cannot be made up to the full scale for some time to come, and that our arrangements for passive defence and the organisation to fit the country to withstand an attack, though they have made marked progress in the past few months have not as yet reached a very advanced stage.

For the present, therefore, I propose to give priority to building up our fighter force as soon as possible with fully adequate reserves both of aircraft and personnel, and to aim at as high an output of fighter aircraft in war as can be secured from that section of the industry devoted to the production of fighter aircraft.'⁽⁷⁸⁾

The number of aircraft required was related to the strength of the German long-range bomber force, and recent estimates of that strength suggested an increase of our own first-line fighter strength from 640 to 800 aircraft.

Second, bombers. What was needed, according to Sir Kingsley Wood, was not numerical parity in aircraft with the German bomber force, but a striking force 'capable of delivering an equal load of

* See above, section 3.

bombs at the desired range. The policy of the Air Staff was to develop large high-performance bombers equipped with a heavy bomb load and carrying formidable defensive armament; German policy, on the other hand, appeared to be to spread bombing capacity among a larger number of aircraft with smaller loads.*

This was the first time that the Cabinet had been presented with the developing views of the Air Staff on the subject of reserves, and also with the full details of the Air Staff's new bomber programme and the strategic arguments upon which its use was based. The bomber programme had thereby become not a request for a larger number of bombers, but for authority to order more of the new types of aircraft, so that within the existing squadron strength the older or interim types could be replaced by an earlier date, i.e. by the summer of 1941 instead of that of 1943. Finally, Sir Kingsley Wood announced his intention of concentrating orders for new aircraft, both fighters and bombers, on a limited number of types. This programme was estimated to demand, eventually, 3,700 fighters and 3,500 heavy bombers to provide full first-line strength on the scale indicated and adequate reserves. For the time being, however, the Secretary of State for Air asked for immediate authority to place orders for 1,850 fighters and 1,750 heavy bombers, together with a total of 2,400 other types.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Overseas requirements were mentioned, but were to be dealt with only 'as soon as may be practicable.'⁽⁸¹⁾

On 26th October the Cabinet referred Sir Kingsley Wood's proposals to a small committee for further consideration. That committee, in turn, found it difficult to reconcile the views of the Secretary of State for Air with those of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The latter pointed out that if these proposals were approved without reservation, then the Air Ministry would need to spend in the five years to April 1942 a sum which would exceed by nearly £350 million the amount allotted to it out of the agreed total expenditure in all three Services for that period. Other estimates were rising at the same time, while the yield of revenue was sagging with

* The following table summarises the difference between the future types now in view and those with which the Air Force was currently equipped:

| | <i>Top Speed</i> | <i>Bomb-Load at Cruising Speed at Range</i> | | |
|----------------|------------------|---|--------|-----------------------|
| | m.p.h. | lbs | m.p.h. | miles |
| Future types— | | | | |
| Stirling | 327 | 10,000 | 280 | 2,000 |
| Manchester | 320 | 7,520 | 280 | 2,000 |
| Halifax | 332 | 8,000 | 275 | 2,000 |
| Present types— | | | | |
| Whitley II | 215 | 3,080 | 177 | 1,500 |
| Blenheim | 279 | 1,000 | 200 | 1,000 |
| Battle | 252 | 1,000 | 200 | 1,000 ⁽⁷⁹⁾ |

the declining industrial and commercial activity of the country as a whole.

'The Air Ministry's programme,' wrote the Chancellor, 'is, therefore, so costly as to raise serious doubts whether it can be financed beyond 1939-40 without the gravest danger to the country's stability. The damage which I apprehend is not of the sort which can be got over by calling for "sacrifices"; it would consist in such a weakening of our economic and financial strength as no increase of taxation could remedy. . . .

I do not for a moment claim that purely financial considerations can have priority over urgent and definite needs for material defence. The two things have to be considered together. The worst of all results would be to reach a position hereafter in which defence plans should be openly seen to have been frustrated by the financial and economic situation.

I think, therefore, that a sharp distinction should be drawn between the total figures of the Secretary of State's *fighter* programme and the total figures of the Secretary of State's *bomber* programme. The Cabinet should be invited as a decision of policy to authorise an intensive concentration on the production of fighters up to the full figures proposed, with particular regard to getting the maximum production possible within 1939. Orders for 1,850 fighters as proposed in . . . the Secretary of State's paper should be approved.

So far as the bombers are concerned, I suggest that the Cabinet should give general approval to the placing of orders sufficient to avoid substantial dismissals in the factories concerned and to provide a normal complement of work in any national factory designed for this work, but at the moment under-employed.'⁽⁸²⁾

On 7th November the Cabinet met again to come to a firm decision. Both the Chancellor and the Secretary of State recapitulated the arguments they had already presented in their memorandum and a lengthy discussion followed. Most Ministers present, including the Prime Minister, supported the Chancellor's view, that purely defensive measures were more justifiable than offensive ones. The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence also intervened with the argument—familiar in the strategic discussions of a later generation—that provided we were in a position to deliver an attack on Germany in sufficient strength to create a deterrent effect, then it did not follow that any increase in German strength must be matched by an increase in our own. In the end, accepting the limitations of finance and the clear priority to be given to a defensive strategy, the Cabinet agreed to approve, in principle, the full programme of 3,700 additional fighters and to give authority straightaway for the placing of orders for one half of that total. Ministers also agreed that efforts

should be made to secure the maximum production of fighters within the period ending March 1940. So far as bombers were concerned the Secretary of State for Air was asked to give further consideration to the policy of concentrating on the development and construction of large high-performance bombers capable of a very heavy bomb-load in the light of some criticism of this policy which had been made by his colleagues. Further, subject to that reconsideration, approval was given for the placing of sufficient orders for bombers to avoid substantial dismissals in the aircraft factories concerned, and to maintain an adequate flow of production.⁽⁸³⁾

Scheme 'M' was the last of the pre-war programmes. It was still, theoretically, the objective to be aimed at when war broke out in September 1939, but it did not immediately affect the schemes already in operation in the winter of 1938-39; these latter schemes counted upon the current available production capacity of the aircraft industry which was now being worked up to its peak during the nine months before war broke out.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Moreover, any immediate big increase in the size of the R.A.F. was still blocked by the long-standing problems of aircrew recruiting and training, problems which the introduction of compulsory service in the spring of 1939 came too late to solve before the outbreak of war. What Scheme 'M' did was to provide for a total of 50 instead of 38 fighter squadrons together with an increase of bomber squadrons from 73 to 85, the latter to be entirely of heavy bombers. The date for completion was the spring of 1942.⁽⁸⁵⁾

5. *Bombing Policy*

Not the least important result of the Cabinet's decision, in November 1938, to press on as quickly as possible with the fighter programme and to hold back both current bomber production and a decision on the introduction of the new four-engined aircraft, was to postpone yet further the prospect of a major counter-offensive against Germany from the air. Already, by the time of the Munich crisis, it was accepted that such an offensive could not take place until 1941 even if war broke out in 1939; now it looked as though there would be a further delay of a year or even more. Britain was thus forced back, even more than previously, upon a defensive strategy in the opening phases of a major war against Germany.

With vivid memories of the bloody trench stalemate of the First World War it is not surprising that airmen thought they possessed a war winning weapon which could avoid a repetition of prolonged battlefield contest, and also that they sometimes grew impatient with those who refused to believe as they did. For Trenchard, the great advantage of air power was that it could strike directly at

the enemy's vital centres, at his factories and communications, at the material and moral sources in his society which alone sustained his armies in the field and his navies at sea. Moreover, to the extent that such an offensive was successful it must inevitably slow down the enemy's own air attack against ourselves; offence, in other words, was the best defence.⁽⁸⁶⁾ From all this was developed the concept of the 'knock-out blow' or 'bolt from the blue' whereby war would open with a sudden, almost certainly unannounced attack from the air upon industrial and communications centres and their populations. Whatever popular fiction may have added to the frightening colours of this picture there was enough in it of serious military argument to influence policy. For example, in the spring of 1934, the C.A.S., Sir Edward Ellington, outlined to his colleagues on the Chiefs of Staff Committee how he foresaw operations in a war against Germany. Fighting would begin with bombing by both sides, Germany attacking London and south east England, Britain bombing German industrial centres, particularly in the Ruhr. These attacks would go on for three or four weeks, each side trying to force the other into surrender or, at the very least, from attack back into defence. As the mutual bombing died down from sheer exhaustion there would follow a critical phase during which both sides would lick their wounds and take stock; the combatant with superior reserves would build up again for a renewed attack. Then the weaker side would be faced with the immediate problem of survival.⁽⁸⁷⁾ There were those who argued that the power of the 'knock-out blow' could be exaggerated.⁽⁸⁸⁾ And Sir Edward Ellington made it clear that he agreed with this view if by such a phrase was meant defeat within a period of hours. What he did mean, so he explained on a later occasion, was that 'a country seizing the initiative in this way might get a big advantage and might deal the attacked nation a blow from which it might be unable to recover'.⁽⁸⁹⁾

Whatever the promise of quick decision, however, the obvious drawback of war fought in this way was that it threatened destruction to the essentials of civilian life and terror to the civilian populations—consequences which could be argued to be politically undesirable and morally indefensible. It is not surprising, therefore, that there were persistent attempts, throughout the inter-war years and down to 1936-37, to bring this new menace under control by some form of international agreement designed to restrict methods of aerial warfare. The disarmament policies of British governments, particularly during the fourteen years when Mr. Baldwin and Mr. MacDonald reoccupied No. 10 Downing Street, illustrate such attempts time and again. Indeed, as late as November 1936, and arising out of a discussion on a report of the Sub-Committee on Food Supply in Time of War, the C.I.D. agreed that 'it would be to our

general advantage to have an International Agreement restricting Aerial Warfare, notwithstanding the doubt that must exist as to whether such laws would, in practice, be observed'.⁽⁹⁰⁾

It would be wrong to minimise the strength of opposition to indiscriminate bombing based on moral grounds. In Britain, however (and Britain was really not very different from some other countries in this respect) the same opposition could be justified by purely practical considerations as well. It was normally assumed, for example, that London was far more vulnerable to air attack than any single target in France or Germany, because it was so concentrated.⁽⁹¹⁾ 'Our main preoccupation,' said the Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, in April 1932, must be 'the danger of London being heavily and suddenly bombed by way of a knock-out blow'.⁽⁹²⁾ In February 1935 the C.N.S., Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, put forward a similar but broader based argument for the restriction of bombing. He said that he and the C.I.G.S. favoured some international agreement against unrestricted bombing because they felt that, 'since the air provided the only way in which this country could be attacked, there was tremendous advantage in trying to do something which might avoid such a form of warfare against the civil population'.⁽⁹³⁾

Airmen, on the other hand, normally opposed these attempts to outlaw or restrict air warfare, and certainly so during the period of the Geneva Disarmament Conference and that of the Preparatory Commission. Their opposition was not to the arguments of morality but rather to those of practicality. Their view was that difficulties of definition would preclude agreement and that, even if agreement were reached, there would be no certain method of enforcement. In those circumstances the voluntary acceptance of limitation would hamstring any country which took the lead; and, so they were inclined to argue, Britain had already gone far enough in voluntary disarmament.

Successive Secretaries of State for Air and the Air Staff were proved correct in their forecast that there would be no international agreement. Unfortunately at about the same time it also became apparent that Britain had already fallen behind Germany in the race for air force expansion, that there was little or no hope of catching up before war broke out, and that a long period would still be needed, after the beginning of hostilities, for Britain to get her war production machine into top gear. What that meant—and to airmen as much as to everybody else during the last eighteen months or so before September 1939—was that the war in the air must begin with a strategy of 'close defence' to protect, above all, London and the south-east from a knock-out blow while at the same time engaging in a policy of restricted retaliatory bombing designed, hopefully, to dissuade

Germany from launching an all-out air attack upon us. In other words, the practical result of the expansion programmes examined earlier in this chapter was a pre-war plan for an essentially defensive air strategy in the early stages of the war, designed to inflict as much damage as possible on the enemy over or adjacent to Britain herself and to give the people of this country maximum immunity from bombing during that phase of the war. Such a strategy would enable the R.A.F. to conserve the trained air crews of 1939 so that they would form the nucleus of a much larger force capable of going over to the offensive in 1941.⁽⁹⁴⁾

This policy of restricted bombing, i.e. of bombing only carefully selected military targets unless German action forced us to do otherwise, was imposed on the R.A.F. as an emergency measure during the Munich crisis. Soon afterwards, in an *Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War against Germany*,⁽⁹⁵⁾ the Chiefs of Staff pointed out that Germany could probably drop 500-600 tons per day on this country whereas we could reply with only about 100 tons.

'In view of this inferiority in air power' they said, 'and the fact that as a reprisal for any air offensive we might undertake Germany could rapidly switch a far heavier scale of attack upon the Allies, we must take into account the weakness of our air defences, both active and passive, in formulating any plan for an allied air offensive against Germany in the initial phases.'

There were two groups of objectives. First, those where destruction would harm Germany economically or generally weaken her ability to maintain her armed forces in the field. Second, purely military objectives whose destruction would restrict Germany's ability to attack her enemies. They then continued:

'In view of the political objections to the initiation of any action by the Allies which might be misrepresented as an attack upon the civil populace, and the fact that the great initial advantage in air striking power which Germany possesses constitutes a potential menace to the security of this country, we consider that on balance we should be unwise to initiate air attack upon industrial targets in Germany. We make this recommendation with full knowledge that we are refusing to take advantage of a fleeting opportunity to attack the "Achilles heel" of our enemy. Apart from the considerations mentioned above, is that the weight of attack which we and the French could deliver is, in our opinion, inadequate to produce decisive results and must inevitably provoke immediate reprisal action on the part of Germany at a time when our defence measures at home, both active and passive, are very far from complete.'

That remained, in principle, British policy until the outbreak of war.* And since that was so, it was important to ensure that neither the 1939 Staff talks with the French nor the guarantee to Poland of 31st March 1939 led to any weakening of that decision.†

This policy did not, of course, rule out plans for bombing either of a 'legitimate' kind or of a kind which might have to be put into effect if Germany herself initiated unrestricted bombing. The broad principles for plans of both types were made clear in the Chiefs of Staff 'European Appreciation, 1939-40' which, with only few changes, remained the basis of British and then of Allied policy at the beginning of the war.⁽⁹⁷⁾ First, the security of Britain herself must be the principal aim. Therefore if the close air defences needed assistance from the air striking force, the latter would have to be used for that purpose. Second, if the Germans should choose to initiate unrestricted bombing then the British Government would be free to choose either to retaliate in similar kind or to attack with the object of reducing the power of the German air striking force. Such an attack, together with attacks on other targets such as German naval bases, was regarded as 'legitimate' anyway, and could therefore properly be attacked in the third set of circumstances, i.e. mutual restricted bombing.

If unrestricted bombing was adopted, then the industrial area of the Ruhr 'which, in its own sphere, has no counterpart in England or France,' was the most favoured target, with the German aircraft industry a close second. No great hope was held out about the success of such operations. This was partly because of the limitations of our own bombers both in numbers and quality, which demanded that they be moved to bases in northern France if they were to be able to penetrate far into Germany; and partly because the German Government would be freer than the British to disregard the effects of public opinion in circumstances where civilians were the object of air attack. 'We could not,' the Chiefs of Staff concluded, 'therefore count on forcing Germany to modify her offensive by directing our own bombers on to her most vulnerable points, and we should probably have to concentrate upon the alternative of helping to reduce the scale of her attack until it had been brought within manageable proportions.' A counter-force strategy, as implied in those last words would, except in the event of unrestricted bombing, have to exclude the German aircraft industry because of the risk of civilian casualties. The legitimate targets were therefore reduced to the German striking force on the ground and its supporting military units, targets the

* In a memorandum dated 24th October 1938 the Chiefs of Staff were emphatic that any limitation of bombing would be to Britain's advantage.⁽⁹⁶⁾

† For military talks with France and Poland see below, Chapters XVII and XVIII.

bombing of which, it was claimed, the 'experience of the last war has shown to have valuable moral as well as material effect in favourable circumstances'.

Finally, it was stated that, 'in view of the highly conjectural nature of this problem, plans are being prepared for the action of our air striking force to suit all the possible contingencies we can foresee.' But behind that ambitious forecast still lay the basic assumption that severe limits on bombing operations would suit Britain best when war began.

6. *Radar*

A critically important event of the inter-war years was the discovery and development of Radio Direction Finding (R.D.F.) later known as radar.^{(98)*}

Whatever the emphasis laid upon the bomber counter-offensive as a basic element in air strategy it would be unfair both to airmen and to civilians in and attached to the Air Ministry to deny that there were many who were anxious about defence and were well aware of the need not merely to develop new and better fighter aircraft and improved ground defences, but also to enlist the help of any contemporary scientific development relevant to this problem. The awareness of this last need was apparent as early as the summer of 1934 when the air exercises held then made clear how vulnerable London was to enemy bomber attack. As a result, a sub-committee of the C.I.D. was formed, under the chairmanship of Air Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, to examine the possible reorientation of the air defence system of Britain. This committee reported early in 1935.⁽⁹⁹⁾ One of the committee's recommendations was the appointment of a body 'to give further consideration to possible means of defence',⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ and from this resulted the Air Defence Research Committee. Meanwhile, others had been thinking along similar lines at the Air Ministry and, right at the end of 1934, a new committee, the Committee for the Scientific Survey of Air Defence (C.S.S.A.D.) was set up under the chairmanship of Mr. (later Sir) H. T. Tizard.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ The terms of reference of the second committee were, more specifically than the first, 'to consider how far recent advances in scientific and technical knowledge can be used to strengthen the present methods of defence against hostile aircraft'.⁽¹⁰²⁾

One possible way of dealing with hostile aircraft which had already been talked about was that of a 'death ray' by means of which the

* The story of radar in the pre-war years is told only briefly here, since the main emphasis of this work is on the strategic debate and strategic plans at the Cabinet level.

engines, or occupants, or bombs of an aircraft in flight might be damaged and perhaps destroyed. This was soon realised to be impossible. But Mr. (later Sir) R. A. Watson-Watt of the National Physical Laboratory was already working on experiments to detect and locate aircraft in flight by means of the reflection of radio waves as a development of work on the reflection of such waves by the Heaviside layer or ionosphere.

Watson-Watt's ideas were discussed at the first meeting of the C.S.S.A.D. on 28th January 1935. A month later he gave the first practical demonstration of his technique, using the 50 metre beam from the B.B.C.'s station at Daventry, and successfully detected an aircraft eight miles away. From now on R.D.F. progressed steadily. A research station was set up at Orfordness in Suffolk, and Bawdsey Manor, in the same county, became the headquarters of a group of four detecting stations along the Thames estuary. These stations were planned to be the first instalment in a line of twenty 'chain home' (C.H.) stations covering the coastline from the Isle of Wight to the Tyne. Progress was so rapid that, in April 1936, Tizard was able to report that aircraft could now be detected sixty miles out to sea. This meant that fighters would now be given much longer warning than had been possible hitherto, thus removing the need to restrict the aircraft fighting zone, at any rate by day, to a strip some miles inland. Fighters could now go forward to engage the enemy before he reached the outer artillery zone.

In July 1937 the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Swinton, made a factual report on progress so far to Ministers on the D.P.(P).⁽¹⁰³⁾ Detection was now regularly possible up to 80 miles and sometimes a good deal more, at heights of 8,000 feet and above. While improvements in range were considerable, much work still needed to be done on bearing and also the measuring of numbers of aircraft in formations. He now asked for authority to go ahead with the full chain of stations planned at a capital cost of £1 million and annual operational costs of about £165,000. In August Treasury approval was given. Then in late 1938 and early 1939 authority was given for the extension of the system north to Scapa Flow and west to Bristol.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ At a meeting of the C.I.D. in February, 1939, Dominion High Commissioners were told briefly of what had been done and promised a meeting with the Secretary of State for Air to discuss ways in which R.D.F. might be adapted for their own particular needs.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ When war broke out in September 1939 about 20 stations were in full operation stretching from the Orkneys to the Isle of Wight.

The practical importance of radar throughout the Second World War, and not least its invaluable help to give a hard pressed Fighter Command the ability to defeat the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain, is a matter of record. It is perhaps expecting too

much to think that airmen or politicians before the war, at any rate those who knew of these developments, should have foreseen their revolutionary importance and adapted their strategic ideas accordingly. Nonetheless, radar hit at the foundation of the theory of the counter-offensive. If attacking bombers could be detected, located and attacked before dropping their loads then perhaps the bomber would not always get through; active defence might then become the equal partner of counter-offence in a complete plan of air operations.

This book is based very largely on the records of the Cabinet, the C.I.D., the C.O.S. and their respective top-level sub-committees. It would be difficult, from that evidence alone, to get a clear picture of radar in the pre-war years and even more difficult to assess how much an awareness of it affected strategic debate at the Cabinet level. Apart from one or two papers in the 'A' or Home Defence series of memoranda of the C.I.D. and one progress report by Lord Swinton to the D.P.(P), the rest has to be scraped together. It could, of course, be argued that information so highly classified was not likely to appear in the written record. But the scraps there are belie that suggestion. In any case, there were regular secretarial methods for dealing with classified information, and discussion, and there is no evidence of the use of such methods in this case.

What the evidence suggests, in fact, is that the debate about air programmes between the Air Ministry on the one hand and the Cabinet on the other, in the period 1936-39, was largely unaffected by technical developments, radar among them. So far as the Cabinet was concerned, this should have become clear from the account of the expansion programmes given in this chapter. The views of most Ministers, and the decisions of the Cabinet, were based on financial and political arguments, hardly ever on strictly military ones. If Ministers wanted more fighter aircraft, and we have seen that they did, they could greatly have strengthened their arguments by reference to improved machines, Hurricanes and Spitfires, as well as to radar. Ministers as a whole did not do this and nor, at any rate in Cabinet debate, did either Secretary of State for Air of the period. These were years in which, in the R.A.F., the balance was tipping temporarily in favour of defence. Major strategic decisions were not ostensibly made for that reason.*

The evidence from within the Air Ministry leads to something like the same conclusion. During the last eighteen months before the war the Air Staff at last realised the inadequacy of the weapons currently

* The point here is not that some Ministers—e.g. Sir Thomas Inskip—failed to argue for a defensive strategy, but rather that they omitted some of the more obvious arguments for their purpose.

at the disposal of Bomber Command to achieve a genuinely damaging counter-offensive. But this realisation, although it occurred simultaneously with pressure from the Cabinet to concentrate more on fighter defence, led only slowly to a change of strategic outlook due to the coming into squadron service of new fighters and the greatly improved technical background to their operations. The change did occur, and so much more plainly in the Air Ministry than in Downing Street. But it remained, to some extent, a change of mind forced on some airmen as well as freely adopted by others. Radar certainly did not inspire a sudden revolution in thinking, either on its own or in combination with other developments tending in the same direction.^{(106)*}

7. Readiness for War, 1938-39

Would it have been preferable, from the point of view of Royal Air Force preparations, to have gone to war at the time of Munich rather than a year later? Or did that extra year, whether by calculation or not, make a vital difference to fighting capacity?

In his paper to the Cabinet of late October 1938, the paper already referred to in our account of Scheme 'M', Sir Kingsley Wood included a table of Mobilisable Squadrons and Reserves of Aircraft and Crews. That table gave the relevant figures for 1st October 1938 and for 1st August 1939. It also included the following note:

'Pending the full provision of reserve aircraft and crews, only a proportion of our first-line bomber squadrons are counted as mobilisable, the remainder being "rolled up" to find reserves of aircraft and crews. For the fighters, on the other hand, it is considered better to deploy the full first-line at the outset, accepting a rapid and progressive diminution of the numbers that can be maintained in action.'

This explains why no reserves were shown in the table for the fighters at either of the two dates or for the bombers at the earlier date. The table was as follows:

* In commenting on this present chapter in the summer of 1969, Lord Swinton criticised the author's views. He claimed that 'as soon as radar was discovered and proved, the theory that the only defence was counter-attack was dead,' and that it was inaccurate to argue that 'the Air Ministry did not press for and lay down a larger Fighter Defence Programme till a year or so before the war'. The first comment is, factually, correct; but Lord Swinton did not persuade the Air Staff of this at the time nor, so far as the Cabinet evidence goes, did he try to impress his ministerial colleagues with the significance of radar. On the second point Lord Swinton's view does seem to be different from the detailed and convincing story told in Webster and Frankland.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

Table 20

Current and Planned R.A.F. Bomber Types—Comparative Performances: Estimated Mobilisable R.A.F. Aircraft and Reserves at 1st October 1938 and 1st August 1939.

| <i>Fighters</i> | <i>Squadrons</i> | <i>First-line Aircraft</i> | <i>Reserves</i> |
|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 1st October 1938 | 29 | 406 | Nil |
| 1st August 1939 | 36 | 576 | Nil |
| <i>Medium Bombers</i> | | | |
| 1st October 1938 | 31 | 372 | Nil |
| 1st August 1939 | 20 | 320 | Approximately 6 weeks' reserve of aircraft and personnel |
| <i>Heavy Bombers</i> | | | |
| 1st October 1938 | 10 | 120 | Nil |
| 1st August 1939 | 14 | 168 | Approximately 6 weeks' reserve of aircraft and personnel |

Of the 406 fighters which could be mobilised on 1st October 1938 238 were obsolete or obsolescent, quite apart from a reserve situation which was totally inadequate. The paper then continued:

'The situation thus disclosed . . . will be definitely unsatisfactory throughout the next twelve months, particularly as regards fighters. We shall be engaged in the re-equipment of our fighter squadrons with Hurricanes and Spitfires, in the production of which, especially the Spitfire, there have been serious setbacks. The process of re-equipment inevitably means that until the first-line squadrons are fully equipped with the new types we cannot accumulate reserves, while the old types thrown up on re-equipment have to be used for training purposes.'⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

If one looks at the list of war stations and types of aircraft available in September 1938, it appears that there were only six squadrons of Hurricanes and Spitfires, with about a dozen or more due to be re-equipped in the coming six months.* Bomber Command was rather better equipped and included 16 Blenheim squadrons; but no Wellington was yet in service. A year later, in September 1939, 26 squadrons were equipped with Hurricanes and Spitfires—20 more than a year earlier—while Bomber Command could now boast

* The effectiveness of even these aircraft was then limited by the lack of heating for their guns, which meant that the guns could not be fired at heights above 15,000 feet.

a total of 21 squadrons of Blenheim, Whitley and Wellington types.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

In September 1939 the comparative totals of the British, French and German air forces were as follows:

Table 21
Comparative Totals of Aircraft and Reserves, September 1939,
for Britain, France and Germany.

| Class of Aircraft | British | | French | | German | |
|------------------------------|------------|----------|------------|------------------------|------------|----------|
| | First-Line | Reserves | First-Line | Reserves | First-Line | Reserves |
| Bomber | 536 | 1,450 | 463 | — | 1,750 | 1,700 |
| Short-range bomber | — | — | | | 380 | 700 |
| Fighters | 608 | 320 | 634 | | 1,215 | 1,700 |
| Long-distance reconnaissance | — | — | 444 | Approx. 1,600 reserves | 360 | 200 |
| Army Co-operation | 96 | 105 | | | 310 | 300 |
| Coastal reconnaissance | 216 | 125 | 194 | | | |
| Fleet Air Arm | 204 | 200 | | | 305 | 300 |
| | 1,660 | 2,200 | 1,735 | 1,600 | 4,320 | 4,900 |

In other words, the Royal Air Force even then faced an enemy with more than twice its own nominal strength; and the real situation was even worse than that since some of the R.A.F. squadrons normally available would have had to be held back to provide reserves for the rest.⁽¹¹⁰⁾

Nonetheless, the improvement in the strength of the Royal Air Force in the twelve months after Munich was very considerable. Its aircraft had been extensively modernised and its reserve position considerably improved. When war began the outlook was certainly not bright; but it was a great deal brighter than it had been at the time of Munich.* In September 1938 the Royal Air Force was not, in fact, in a position to cope with the German Air Force. At a committee meeting on 27th of that month, the Air Member for Supply and Organisation, commenting on recent events, said: 'We had during the past few years been building up a front-line Air Force which was nothing but a facade. We had nothing in the way of reserves or organisation behind the front-line with which to maintain it.'⁽¹¹¹⁾ Only a few weeks later, on 17th November, Mr. Churchill's summing up in the House of Commons was that 'the equipment of the Royal Air Force is deplorable.'⁽¹¹²⁾ Although the gap between the respective air forces was still wide in September 1939, in numbers it was less frightening, and in quality much less so than a year earlier. From the point of view of the R.A.F. there was no reason for arguing that it would have been better to go to war at the time of Munich.

* This should, however, be seen as an improvement based on the foundations laid by Lord Swinton.

But it would be wrong to end on that note. Whatever the weaknesses in the Royal Air Force in September 1939, and the much greater ones of a year earlier, it is nonetheless true that by the outbreak of war all the foundations for an air force of the highest quality had already been laid. Those who fought so bravely in the summer of 1940 had more than their own great courage and skill to sustain them. They had behind them the devotion of a whole generation of airmen back to Lord Trenchard, the inspirer of them all. Throughout the inter-war years these men had been determined that the Royal Air Force should, at its next great test in war, be second-to-none; and by September 1939 all the preparatory work was complete for a vast war-time expansion in which quality was assured despite the mobilisation of unprecedented numbers. By the outbreak of war the Royal Air Force, in terms of quality and equipment, personnel and training, and also of war production potential, was well on the way to fulfilling the highest hopes of its architects and builders. Nor should this be seen as the achievement of airmen alone. They, in their turn, had been supported by some men of great ability as Secretaries of State for Air, Lord Swinton not least among them. Moreover, whatever the disappointments and frustrations airmen had experienced as a result of political limits imposed on finance and production, they had on the whole been well supported by Ministers generally and by Neville Chamberlain more strongly than is often believed.* If the Royal Air Force was, in fact, ready for its great test when war broke out, then the credit must lie with all those responsible for policy in the pre-war years.

* Lord Swinton is almost certainly correct in arguing 'that Chamberlain never wholeheartedly accepted that rearmament was necessary'.⁽¹³⁾ But Chamberlain was to the fore of those Ministers who thought that, in what was done, the emphasis should be on rearmament in the air. The late Lord Bridges, Secretary to the Cabinet from the autumn of 1938 onwards, and earlier very closely involved in liaison between the Treasury and the Air Ministry, on several occasions, in discussion with the author, emphasised the great contribution Chamberlain made to R.A.F. expansion in the pre-war years.

SOURCES

| | Page |
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| (1) Cab. Cons. 31(34) Appendix; and D.P.R. 82 | 560 |
| (2) H.C. 5s, Vol. 292: 1274-75; H.L., Vol. 93: 803-05. See also Cmd. 4822, Cab. Cons. 29(34) and C.P. 193(34) | 560 |
| (3) Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, p. 71 | 561 |
| (4) D.C.(M)(32) 63rd Mtg. p. 11 | 561 |
| (5) D.C.(M)(32) 145 | 561 |
| (6) Cmd. 5107. See also Cab. Cons. 10(36) | 561 |
| (7) Postan, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 16, n. 1 | 562 |
| (8) Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, p. 71. See also Sir Kingsley Wood's speech on 9th March 1939. H.C. 5s, Vol. 344: 2387 | 562 |
| (9) D.P.R. 82, p. 15 | 563 |
| (10) D.P.R. 82, Appendix A; C.P. 205(34), para. 50 and C.P. 193(34), paras. 7-18 | 564 |
| (11) D.P.R. 82, para. 18 | 564 |
| (12) C.P. 27(36), p. 1 | 564 |
| (13) This is made clear, for example, in a memorandum by the C.A.S., <i>Air Defence Requirements against Germany</i> , D.C.(M) (32) 115 | 564 |
| (14) D.C.(M) (32) 120 | 564 |
| (15) Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, p. 67. There the Air Ministry is said not to have welcomed this aspect of Scheme 'A'. However true that may be, I cannot find evidence to suggest that Ministers overruled their profes- sional advisers on this matter. | 564 |
| (16) C.P. 27(36). This was the memorandum in which the Secretary of State for Air set out the important new develop- ments of conversion to heavy and medium bombers. | 565 |
| (17) C.P. 18(37). See also D.P.(P) 12, p. 6 | 565 |
| (18) Ibid. | 566 |
| (19) D.P.R. 168; see also D.P.R. 35th Mtg. | 566 |
| (20) Cab. Cons. 9(37); see also D.P.R. 168 | 566 |
| (21) D.P.(P) 12. | 566 |
| (22) Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, p. 74. This point does not, of course, explicitly appear in D.P.(P) 12, but the memorandum does, in general, bear out the Webster and Frankland argument | 566 |
| (23) D.P.(P) 12, p. 7 | 567 |
| (24) Ibid., pp. 8 and 15 | 567 |

- (25) Ibid., p. 8, para. 11 568
- (26) For full tables comparing Schemes 'F' and 'J' see D.P.(P) 12, Table III 568
- (27) Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 74 568
- (28) See, for example, C.I.D. 1264-B and 1265-B; D.P.(P) 7 and D.P.(P) 12 568
- (29) D.P.(P) 12, pp. 3 and 9. The Air Staff's memorandum was prepared immediately prior to General Milch's visit 569
- (30) Ibid., pp. 2 and 9 569
- (31) This point about heavy bombers in connection with Scheme 'M' is dealt with in some detail in Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 74-75 569
- (32) C.P. 316(37) 569
- (33) D.P.(P) 12, pp. 3, 9 and 11 570
- (34) C.P. 316(37) 570
- (35) D.P.(P) 12, Appendix 'C' 570
- (36) C.P. 316(37), para. 97 571
- (37) Cab. Cons. 49(37)1 571
- (38) C.P. 316(37), para. 98(iii) and Cab. Cons. 49(37)1 571
- (39) C.P. 218(38) 572
- (40) R.A.F. unpublished narrative, *The Expansion of the Royal Air Force, 1933-1939*, Chapter VI; and D. Richards and H. St. G. Saunders, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18 573
- (41) C.P. 24(38) Appendix IV 575
- (42) See also D.P.(P) 16, Appendix IV. This point should be taken together with Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 77, where it is pointed out that the Air Staff themselves were now becoming disillusioned with a policy of major first-line strength, small reserves and a large war potential. But these doubts were not passed on to the Cabinet while Scheme 'K' was under discussion. 575
- (43) C.P. 24(38), p. 4 575
- (44) A.M.S.O.'s memorandum of 11th January 1938 (A.H.B. Folder, V/5/9) 576
- (45) Air Staff memorandum, 4th April 1938. (A.H.B. Folder V/5/11) 576
- (46) C.P. 24(38) 576
- (47) Cab. Cons. 5(38) 576
- (48) C.P. 65(38), pp. 3-4 576
- (49) Cab. Cons. 13(38)3 576
- (50) C.P. 86(38) 576
- (51) Ibid. 577
- (52) C.P. 87(38) 577
- (53) H.C. 5s, Vol. 333: 1410 577

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| (54) | C.P. 87(38) | 578 |
| (55) | C.P. 86(38) | 578 |
| (56) | D.P.(P)22, Appendix II | 578 |
| (57) | C.P. 87(38) | 579 |
| (58) | C.P. 86(38) | 579 |
| (59) | Cab. Cons. 15(38)2 | 579 |
| (60) | C.A.S. archives, Vol. 31 | 579 |
| (61) | Ibid., Scheme 'L' file | 579 |
| (62) | Cab. Cons. 19(38)8 | 579 |
| (63) | Cab. Cons. 21(38)6 | 580 |
| (64) | Air Staff memorandum, 4th April 1938, (A.H.B. Folder, V/5/11) | 581 |
| (65) | H.L. 5s, Vol. 108: 1042-1103; H.C. 5s, Vol. 335: 1749-1876 | 582 |
| (66) | Lord Swinton, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 119 | 582 |
| (67) | Postan, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 20 | 582 |
| (68) | Expansion Progress Meeting, 16th May 1939; see Air 6/38, E.P.M. 168, p. 13 | 582 |
| (69) | Air Staff Memorandum of 4th April 1938, paras. 7 and 8, (A.H.B. folder V/5/11) | 582 |
| (70) | Cab. Cons. 15(38) and Air 6/54, E.P.M. 135, p. 7 | 582 |
| (71) | Memorandum by the Air Staff, <i>ubi supra</i> , paras. 7 and 8 | 583 |
| (72) | C.I.D. 333rd Mtg. | 583 |
| (73) | C.P. 218(38) | 583 |
| (74) | Ibid., paras. 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 17 | 586 |
| (75) | Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, pp. 77-78 | 586 |
| (76) | C.P. 316(37), para. 98 | 586 |
| (77) | Ibid., paras. 93 and 96 | 586 |
| (78) | C.P. 218(38), paras. 48 and 49 | 586 |
| (79) | Ibid., note to para. 15 | 587 |
| (80) | Ibid., para. 29 | 587 |
| (81) | Ibid., para. 55 | 587 |
| (82) | D.P.(P)36, Annex I, para. 23, and Appendix to Annex I | 588 |
| (83) | Cab. Cons. 53(38)2 | 589 |
| (84) | Postan, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 66 | 589 |
| (85) | For some details on particular aircraft developments in the months before the outbreak of war, see Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, pp. 80-81 | 589 |
| (86) | Boyle, <i>op. cit.</i> , pp. 574 and ff.; Webster and Frankland, <i>op. cit.</i> , Vol. I, Pt. I | 590 |
| (87) | C.O.S. Mtg., 9th May 1934. See also C.O.S. Mtg. of 4th May | 590 |
| (88) | C.I.D. 268th Mtg., p. 5 | 590 |
| (89) | Ibid. | 590 |

- (90) C.I.D. 284th Mtg., p. 6 591
- (91) See, for example, C.O.S. 341 and C.O.S. Meeting, 4th May 1934. 591
- (92) A.H.B. IIA/1/34c, Folio 129 591
- (93) C.I.D. 268th Mtg. p. 7 591
- (94) A.H.B. 21. Supplement to *The R.A.F. in the Bombing offensive against Germany*, Chapter I; also Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Pt. I 592
- (95) D.P.(P)32 592
- (96) C.O.S. 786 593
- (97) For a description of details, see Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, I, Pt. I. Only the guide lines for such plans are given here 593
- (98) The detailed radar story can be found in the following books, among others: M. M. Postan, D. Hay, J. D. Scott, *op. cit.*, Chapter XV; Collier, *op. cit.*, passim; Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Pt. I; Lord Swinton, *op. cit.*, passim; R. W. Clark, *Tizard* (London 1965), Chapters 5-8; Sir R. Watson-Watt, *Three Steps to Victory* (London, 1958) 594
- (99) C.I.D., 205-A; C.I.D. 269th Mtg. 594
- (100) C.I.D. 269th Mtg., para. 92 594
- (101) Clark, *op. cit.*, Chapter 5 594
- (102) *Ibid.*, p. 112 594
- (103) D.P.(P)11 595
- (104) C.I.D. 308-A 595
- (105) C.I.D. 346th Mtg. 595
- (106) The Air Ministry aspect of the story is recounted in Webster and Frankland, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Pt. I 597
- (107) *Ibid.* 597
- (108) C.P. 218(38), para. 40 598
- (109) Air Ministry file S.38466, Pt. III 599
- (110) W.P.(39)102, Memorandum from Sir Kingsley Wood to the War Cabinet, dated 29th September, 1939 599
- (111) Air 6/54, E.P.M. 137, p. 9 599
- (112) H.C. 5s, Vol. 341: 1138 599
- (113) Lord Swinton, *op. cit.*, p. 121 600

PART IV

STRATEGY FOR AN ALLIANCE

PART IV
CHAPTER XVI
ANGLO-FRENCH STAFF TALKS,
1936-38

1. *The Rhineland Crisis and Staff Talks, 1936*

BY THE Treaty of Locarno the United Kingdom undertook some definite commitments which might involve her intervention in a European war without reducing her responsibilities elsewhere. Theoretically the United Kingdom could be faced in this situation, with several possibilities—including those of a war with Germany against France, or a war with France against Germany. Whatever the position in 1925, however, it was accepted ten years later by the Chiefs of Staff 'that the likelihood of war with France is not regarded seriously' and that the United Kingdom's likely commitment under Locarno was concerned only with 'the contingency of a war in which we are fighting with France against Germany'.⁽¹⁾ Indeed, this assumption that, in a major European war, the United Kingdom would be involved only on the same side as France and never against her was linked to the further assumption that, in a war against Germany and Japan in combination, Britain's 'One-Power Navy' could cope with its widespread responsibilities only with the help of the French Navy.⁽²⁾

It might be supposed that this growing definiteness about the strategic outline of a future major war would have led to a wish to insure against the risks of such a war by means of preparatory, or even simply exploratory staff talks with the French. But that was not so, as had already been made clear in another Chiefs of Staff memorandum prepared only a few weeks before the one just quoted from. During the Anglo-French conversations of early February 1935, the French proposed a treaty of mutual guarantee in case of air attack.* The main purpose of this proposal was to put teeth into Locarno. The French scheme proposed that, so far as western Europe was concerned, the signatories of Locarno 'would undertake to give the immediate assistance of their aerial forces to whichever of the Contracting States might be the victim of an unprovoked aggression by

* See above, p. 148.

way of the air on the part of another of the Contracting States'.⁽³⁾ Not only did the proposed Air Pact seek to guard against sudden attack by air by providing for immediate assistance in such an event; it also differed from Locarno—so far as Britain was concerned—in making her a guaranteed as well as a guarantor partner.

In their analysis of the military implications of this proposal the Chiefs of Staff came down firmly against it, except as part of a much more general armaments settlement. It is not necessary to consider here all the arguments against the French suggestion. But some are relevant.

'In accordance with the French proposal', they wrote, 'immediate assistance is to be given to the party which has been the object of the attack. The French Government have been anxious for many years to have military conversations with us, and the conclusion of a pact of this nature will, we presume, serve to strengthen their demands.* Although it would be possible without previous consultation, to implement effectively our obligation to the Germans by operating from aerodromes in this country if the French were the aggressors, to bring effective aid to the French would involve the despatch overseas of air forces, and the necessary preparations would involve discussions with the French. This raises the difficulty that conversations with France alone would be unfair to the other signatories, and conversations with all the signatories would clearly be out of the question.'

This last objection would obviously apply just as much to Staff talks as a result of the original Locarno commitment. And yet if, in practice, common action with France only was likely, then the objection has the appearance of a formal excuse to cover a difficulty which went deeper. It is true that, at the end of their memorandum on the proposed Air Pact, the Chiefs of Staff stated that they would regard a defensive alliance with France, and with Belgium also, with much less apprehension; but they did not explain the reasons for their preference.⁽⁴⁾

The issue of Staff talks was raised again during the Rhineland crisis of 1936. Immediately after the military occupation of the zone, the interested Powers—other than Germany—attempted to devise a formula by means of which some compromise could be effected between the claims of Germany on the one hand and the fears of France and Belgium on the other. The details of a possible formula were set out in an Anglo-Franco-Belgian document dated 19th

* Author's note: The paper does not give any evidence to bear out its assertion of 'anxious for many years'.

March and issued as a White Paper. The issuing Powers declared that nothing which had happened before or since Germany's unilateral action could 'be considered as having freed the Signatories of that Treaty from any of their obligations or guarantees', and went on to state that they undertook 'forthwith to instruct their General Staffs to enter into contact with a view to arranging the technical conditions in which the obligations which are binding upon them should be carried out in case of unprovoked aggression'.⁽⁵⁾

It appears that the matter of Staff talks was first mooted by M. Flandin at a private meeting of heads of Delegations of the Locarno Powers on 12th March, and that his suggestion was designed to make automatic military action possible. His scheme—of which Staff talks were one item—proved unacceptable to the British delegates.⁽⁶⁾ H.M. Government were anxious at this stage—i.e. when negotiations involving Germany as a potentially equal partner in a final comprehensive agreement were still going on—not to go beyond the original Locarno provisions and their implications. Their position can be seen more clearly by an examination of the White Paper. That document contemplated Staff talks in three sets of circumstances. First, to consider arrangements to meet the case of unprovoked aggression, defined clearly by the British Government as a 'crossing of the frontier'.⁽⁷⁾ This would involve an assessment by each signatory that such a crossing had taken place, was unprovoked, and therefore demanded action as contemplated in the original treaty. There was nothing automatic about such an arrangement since each signatory was entitled to make its own check of the facts before taking military action. The Powers concerned were simply promising to do what they well might, and perhaps ought to have done long before if they intended Locarno to be something more than a political gesture. And it is interesting to note that the Cabinet now considered Staff talks in this sense, and for this limited purpose, to be a binding commitment.⁽⁸⁾ The second occasion for Staff talks would arise if the current attempt at conciliation with Germany succeeded and was then followed by the conclusion of mutual assistance pacts as contemplated in Section VII of the White Paper. Germany herself would be involved in such pacts. The general scheme involved here would be very much like the arrangements involved in the proposed Air Pact of 1935. The third set of circumstances in which Staff talks were contemplated was that in which the attempts at general conciliation with Germany failed. The Governments of the United Kingdom and Italy proposed, in that event, to assure the Governments of France and Belgium that they

* See above, p. 245.

would take steps to deal with the situation thus created, including establishment or continuation of contacts between the General Staffs of the countries concerned.⁽⁹⁾

Quite clearly the second set of circumstances had not arisen by the end of March 1936. H.M. Government were determined that Staff talks should not extend beyond the necessities of the first contingency and, more particularly, that they should not be conducted in the acute crisis spirit which it seemed might arise if and when conciliation failed. They were, therefore, equally determined that Staff conversations in current circumstances should be limited to existing obligations under the Locarno Treaty; that Staffs should be empowered to discuss technical matters only and not to become involved in a complete inter-change of war plans; and that the conversations should not imply any political understanding or any obligation regarding the organisation of national defence. For these reasons they were anxious, if possible, to keep the talks down to Service Attaché level.⁽¹⁰⁾

In their cautious approach Ministers did not lack support from their Service advisers. Both the Joint Planning Sub-Committee and the Chiefs of Staff themselves argued that it made no sense to engage in Staff talks involving the disclosure of war plans with two Powers—France and Germany—who, virtually by definition, were not going to be on the same side in war. Further, preliminary discussions with the French alone at this stage might prejudice the possibility or usefulness of negotiations for pacts in which Germany also would be included. Finally, if detailed talks with the French were agreed to now in the hope that the mere disclosure of Britain's acute weakness would persuade the French 'to hold their hand', then we were likely to be disappointed.

'The mere fact that the conversations have taken place', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'may encourage the French, who will assume, with justice, that we are morally committed to them. If they think that they are strong enough at the present time to undertake hostilities against Germany, we may find ourselves committed to participation with forces which are not only inadequate to render effective support, but incapable of ensuring our own security with grave consequences to the people of this country'.⁽¹¹⁾

So far as the last part of that quotation is concerned it should be remembered that the Chiefs of Staff had pointed out earlier in their paper that, with a large part of the Royal Navy committed to the Mediterranean, a war against Germany at that particular time would mean that 'the defence of our coasts and of our trade would fall mainly upon French naval forces'. The more general argument that talks would encourage French intransigence remained after the

Abyssinian and Rhineland crises, and was used more than once again.*

Staff conversations, thus reluctantly entered into, took place in London on 15th-16th April 1936. The army talks dealt primarily with the arrangements for getting an expeditionary force into France, i.e. port facilities and transport from ports to assembly areas, but not with the tactical positions which would then be taken up. Moreover, discussion about the provision of war material in the event of German aggression was ruled out of court.

The naval talks dealt only with information about ports, the state of forces in commission and some matters concerning communications and signal codes. The air conversations were restricted to the disclosure of the strengths of the respective forces and the availability of airfields, while other technical details were remitted for further examination. The British view of the desirable scope of such talks had, in fact, been substantially adopted, and the British report was—not unnaturally—that useful work had been done to the satisfaction of all concerned. And there the matter rested.^{(13)†}

2. *Negotiations for a Five-Power Conference, 1936*

The political negotiations, however, which had reduced the Staff talks of April to such comparatively unimportant details, were themselves continued throughout the summer of 1936. In this process H.M. Government took a leading part, pursuing the policy of trying to bring about a comprehensive agreement between the five Powers—Germany, France, Italy, Belgium and the United Kingdom—to take the place of Locarno.⁽¹⁶⁾ It was a difficult and frustrating experience. Hitler refused to answer messages sent to him. Mussolini announced that Italy would not be represented at the proposed meeting of the Locarno Powers.‡ And civil war broke out

* This very marked reluctance of the Chiefs of Staff to engage in serious Staff talks with the French lasted to the spring of 1939, on the whole justifying the Foreign Office view that they were 'terrified of any co-operation with the French'.⁽¹²⁾

The French, however, appear to have believed that opposition to such talks came very largely from Ministers, and that the representatives of the British Services were compelled by Ministers to adopt an attitude contrary to their convictions. This entirely erroneous belief, and the fact that it persisted long after the war, was made clear at a symposium, under the auspices of the Comité International d'Histoire de la 2e Guerre Mondiale, held at the Imperial War Museum, London, in October 1971.

† Some later comments, made in April 1937, illustrate the very limited scope of the 1936 Staff talks and subsequent communications. On that later occasion the Air Staff representative said that 'the policy of the Air Ministry had been to confine discussion with the French authorities to generalities and to avoid any discussion in detail'; on the same occasion the C.I.G.S. said 'that the French had become embarrassing in their endeavours to acquaint us with their plans although we, on our part, had communicated nothing to them'.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is clear that the positions of the two countries had undergone a complete reversal since the Staff talks of 1935.⁽¹⁵⁾

‡ On 13th July.

in Spain. Despite all this, however, representatives of the United Kingdom, France and Belgium did meet in London on 23rd July and reaffirmed their policy of promoting a meeting which would include Germany and Italy also. The first business of such a meeting was to 'be to negotiate a new agreement to take the place of the Rhine Pact of Locarno, and to resolve, through the collaboration of all concerned, the situation created by the German initiative of the 7th March'.⁽¹⁷⁾

As part of the preparations for such a Five-Power conference the Foreign Office drew up a memorandum on the general lines to be followed by H.M. Government. This memorandum posed a number of political and military questions and made some suggestions as to possible answers. The memorandum was then passed on to the Chiefs of Staff, *via* the C.I.D., for comments on the more specifically military issues involved.⁽¹⁸⁾ Among the questions posed by the Foreign Office was whether it was desirable, in any new agreement, to provide for Staff talks with France and Belgium. This question was prompted by the fact that while Britain was currently free to hold such talks with France and Belgium, without any corresponding talks with Germany simply because Germany had repudiated her Locarno promises, such freedom would not necessarily continue if Locarno were replaced by a new agreement which included Germany. In those circumstances, the Foreign Office memorandum commented, the German Government would probably try to stipulate that there should be no Staff talks of any kind; in any case, the Germans were certain to insist that, if there were to be any such talks, they must take place between all the signatories. How far would such a stipulation in practice render Staff talks between the United Kingdom and France and Belgium valueless?

In answer to the question whether, in any new agreement, it would be worthwhile to provide for Staff talks with France and Belgium, the Chiefs of Staff began with the assumption that such an agreement would be on a multi-lateral basis. If this were so, then it would be invidious to provide for Staff conversations with France and Belgium unless provision was also made for Staff conversations with Germany. The Chiefs of Staff repeated the objection, made in an earlier paper, that:

'... Staff conversations will almost inevitably entail the disclosure of detailed war plans for the purpose of co-ordination and neither France nor Germany is in the least likely to disclose her plans to us when she knows that we are carrying on or have carried on similar conversations with other parties and there is no certainty as to the side on which we might be fighting.'⁽¹⁹⁾

But apart from this—classed as a practical difficulty—there was

something which went deeper, namely that 'Staff conversations would inevitably tend to involve us in military commitments which would fetter our freedom of action as to the form that our intervention might take when the occasion arose'. The Chiefs of Staff therefore concluded that 'no provision should be made for Staff conversations with any Power'.⁽²⁰⁾

At this point it is worth looking back to the opening paragraphs of this particular appreciation in which the Chiefs of Staff formulated some general principles which should from the military point of view, so they argued, 'govern our policy in negotiating any new settlement'. The first of these and the most important, and one which appears to reflect the influence of the Chief of Naval Staff was that, '... the broad principles on which our Empire strategy has always been based should not be forgotten nor should the lessons of history be overlooked. The greater our commitments in Europe the less will be our ability to secure our Empire and its communications'. Secondly, although there was an admitted need to contribute towards the 'general appeasement' of Europe, which itself would contribute to the security of the Empire, nevertheless there should be no acceptance of an obligation to engage in any war in which Britain's vital interests were not affected. Thirdly, whatever engagements were entered into, they should include a stipulation that Britain alone would decide whether she should enter a war or remain out of it, and that the form her intervention would take should primarily be a matter for her own decision.⁽²¹⁾ These views, among others, were subsequently accepted by the Cabinet as indicating the general line of policy to be followed in the preparations for the proposed Five-Power Conference. And it was specifically noted that the Foreign Office had itself 'accepted the views of the Chiefs of Staff in regard to the question of Staff conversations.'⁽²²⁾

In fact, no Five-Power Conference was held, nor was any new agreement negotiated to take the place of Locarno. It is true that in November 1936, and again in December, Mr. Eden made forceful speeches in which he warned Britons and others that the United Kingdom was not to be misled 'by any of those comfortable doctrines that we can live secure in a western European glasshouse'. And, more particularly, he stated that British armaments might, and if occasion arose, would be used 'in the defence of France and Belgium against unprovoked aggression in accordance with our existing obligations'.⁽²³⁾ But—and allowing for all the difficulties of a situation in which a definite limited commitment still appeared less desirable than a general agreement on European pacification—the fact remains that assurances of Britain's commitment and of Britain's help were not backed by any practical arrangements to make them effective. Moreover, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Mr.

Eden's undoubtedly honest assurances were far from representative of the beliefs of many of his colleagues in the Government and of the Government's professional military advisers.

H.M. Government's views about the defence of western Europe were further amplified during discussions on the post-Locarno defence of Belgium, discussions which took place simultaneously with those about the Five-Power Conference. During the April Staff talks already mentioned the senior French representative said 'that the French Army was well able without assistance to defend the French frontier from Basle to the Belgian frontier, and that he would prefer to see the British troops lend assistance to the Belgians'.⁽²⁴⁾ Further, it appeared that the French were particularly anxious about the defence of the Belgian coast. After the tripartite talks between France, Belgium and Great Britain M. van Zeeland suggested to Mr. Eden that it would be to the mutual interest of their two countries if further talks could take place, but this time on a bilateral basis. Such talks, conducted discreetly and at Service Attaché level, could deal with such matters as 'air co-operation, landing grounds, types of aircraft, strategic considerations concerning the portions of the front to be held, and the defences of the Belgian coast'. Commenting on these proposals to the Prime Minister, Mr. Eden wrote:

'I think M. van Zeeland's recent remarks to me are the logical sequence of what passed at the Three-Power Conversations, and particularly of the remarks of the French Military Representative. My understanding is that what passed at the Three-Power Conversations could in large part also equally well have passed had we had conversations with Germany; and van Zeeland himself pointed this out to me. But van Zeeland now evidently wants to go further than this, and discuss with us alone, as quietly as may be, the question of plans. This, of course, would rule out corresponding conversations with Germany.'⁽²⁵⁾

Some of the background to this story is complicated and largely irrelevant here. Suffice it to say that the French had shown anxiety about the defence of the Belgian coast before this, and had made suggestions to the Belgians about an inspection of the coast which the latter appear to have regarded with some suspicion.⁽²⁶⁾ Indeed, it is likely that M. van Zeeland's approach to Mr. Eden arose from a mixture of anxiety about Belgium's safety and unwillingness to forge closer connections, in this matter, with France. It is Mr. Eden's reaction, however, which is of interest here. He reaffirmed—what was still official British policy—that anything more than the somewhat superficial Staff talks of April was undesirable so long as negotiations were still going on in the hope of a general agreement including Germany as well as the other Locarno Powers. It

would be foolish to give Germany an excuse for breaking off these negotiations.

'On the other hand', Mr. Eden continued, '... I do think that if we have to go further in conversations—and we may very well have to do so if, as I fear is only too probable, the German negotiations break down—there is a lot to be said for conversations between us and Belgium alone. The French evidently are quite prepared for that, and if we had to have further conversations there are strong arguments for an agreement with Belgium only from the point of view of our public opinion. Thus, the British public is prepared to defend Belgium and understands that it might be asked to defend her. It could not be said of Belgium as of France that she would use our commitment to prosecute a forward policy in some other part of Europe. We could not in a military agreement with Belgium undertake engagements which would affect the distribution of our forces in other theatres, because it could be argued that we have to defend Belgium anyhow on account of our vital interest. On the other hand, by any military agreement with France it might be said that we might become politically committed—as we became to some extent before the War—by assigning to the French one theatre for defence and by ourselves engaging to defend another theatre. Lastly, the Germans would find it much more difficult to object to a British military agreement with Belgium, and its existence would not necessitate a corresponding agreement with Germany.'⁽²⁷⁾

It should be remembered that Mr. Eden was, and remained, more positively in favour of Britain's active commitment to the defence of western Europe than most of his colleagues; yet, in considering what would follow the failure of the attempts at a general settlement in 1936—a contingency which the final paragraphs of the White Paper had specifically accepted as demanding Staff talks with both Belgium and France—he now contemplated such talks with Belgium alone. However willing the French may have been at this stage to see Anglo-Belgian talks designed to ensure the security of the Belgian coast, and however confident they were about their ability to defend their own frontier unaided, there is no evidence in the record of the exchange of views to suggest that the French were willing to forgo Staff talks with Britain on all accounts. Indeed, for twelve months and more they had shown themselves eager to ensure the co-operation of the Royal Air Force in their own defence and to prepare the ground by conversations. And, as events a little later in the year were to show, the French regarded talks with both Belgium and Britain as essential to an adequate preparation for the defence of all their interests.

There can be little doubt that Mr. Eden was correct in his assessment of British public opinion; and public opinion in these matters was not substantially different from that of most Ministers and Service Chiefs. The defence of Belgium was, by tradition, accepted as a British responsibility and in Britain's interests. There still was, as there had been for some years, suspicion of French policies in western and eastern Europe. There had been, since before 1914, and perhaps even more after 1918, a belief that a commitment to the French would encourage them to be irresponsible.* But, as the events of the next three years were to show, unwillingness to accept a political commitment could not prevent, indeed did much to make inevitable, full Staff talks with France in the end.

3. *The Problem of Belgian Neutrality, 1936*

In fact, the suggestion of separate Anglo-Belgian Staff talks went no further and that not least because of an important change of policy on the part of Belgium herself. As the implications of Germany's action in the Rhineland were appreciated, and as it became clear that a new system of security to replace Locarno would be, at best, a lengthy business, the Belgians began to reappraise their country's part in the overall system of western European security. What emerged from all this was a growing conviction that, while in no way contracting out of the collective system based on the Covenant of the League of Nations, Belgium ought, as a small country, to limit her specific obligations. In other words, the best contribution she could make to security in Europe would be to build up her own defence forces to the point where they would be a serious deterrent to an attack upon her by others; to remain a guaranteed Power since it was to the interest of others as well as herself that this should be so; but, possibly, to cease being a guarantor as she had been by Locarno. Behind all this there lay also a deepening conviction, among Walloons as well as Flemings, that there was much to be said for a loosening of ties with France, a conviction which appears to have gained strength after the signing of the Franco-Russian Pact of March 1935.

The first official announcement of Belgium's new foreign policy came with the report of a speech by King Leopold to his Cabinet on 14th October 1936, although there had been fairly clear warnings of what was to happen by more than one Belgian Minister. Despite Belgium's participation in the London meeting of 23rd July the Foreign Office in London, in a memorandum dated 19th August, was already looking at the implications of a situation in which

* It is interesting to note that commitment, by treaty, to the Japanese was traditionally regarded as likely to have the opposite effect.

Belgium would no longer be a guarantor Power. The memorandum set out, among other things, a number of strategic problems connected with the hoped for Five-Power Conference for consideration and comment by the Chiefs of Staff. One of these problems was whether Belgium should 'be relieved of giving any guarantee and her commitments limited to an undertaking to defend her own territory'. The Foreign Office memorandum explained that the question arose from 'recent unofficial hints . . .' in certain quarters in Belgium, and went on to say that . . .

'This feeling is prevalent in Flemish circles, and it is probably due to the fact that as long as Belgium guarantees France, the French General Staff are inclined to make plans whereby in Flemish eyes the Belgian Army is relegated to the position of fighting with the French Army in defence of French territory rather than in defence of Belgian territory. Incidentally, the old Franco-Belgian Military Agreement was terminated some months ago because it had become for these reasons unpopular in Belgium, and at present there exists only an exchange of notes providing for a restricted form of staff conversations.'⁽²⁸⁾

In their reply the Chiefs of Staff admitted that there were some advantages in Belgium continuing as a guarantor Power. In that position 'she would automatically enter any war in western Europe at its outset', and all three countries, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom, 'would be able to frame plans accordingly'. In addition, Belgium's awareness of her obligations might serve to strengthen her determination to keep her defences in order. But there were strong arguments on the other side. 'The effect of relieving Belgium of giving any guarantee', the Chiefs of Staff wrote, 'would be that, in the event of war in western Europe, she could remain neutral for so long as her neutrality was respected by the belligerents'. The 'weighty advantages' of this situation were, first, that it might induce Germany to respect Belgian neutrality, at least at the outset of hostilities, in order both to reduce the likelihood of Britain intervening and to save the Ruhr from air attack from nearby Belgian airfields. Second, 'clearly it was desirable to limit the area of war so far as it is possible to do so'. Third, with Belgium neutral Britain would gain more in her own defence against air attack than she would lose in the power of her own offensive against Germany. Airfields in northern France would, in any case, be available to the bombers of the R.A.F. The Chiefs of Staff concluded from all this that Britain herself had 'most to gain by any effective Belgian neutrality'. But the advantages of Belgium being neutral, at any rate at the beginning of a war, did not end there. It must be assumed that Germany would ultimately be no more likely to respect Belgian

neutrality in a future war than she had been in 1914; the need to deploy her large land forces and to develop the heaviest possible scale of air attack on the United Kingdom both pointed that way. Nonetheless, the Chiefs of Staff were convinced that the longer the violation of Belgium was deferred, 'the better prepared we should be to meet it'. And one obvious way to try to achieve some delay was that Belgium should be neutral at the outset of hostilities.⁽²⁹⁾

The Chiefs of Staff, therefore, were quite clear that

'the advantages of Belgium being a guarantor . . . are outweighed by the disadvantages. Our general conclusions are therefore as follows:

- (i) An effective Belgian neutrality would be greatly to our advantage and should not deliberately be rendered impossible, even though the chances of its being maintained throughout a western European war are remote.
- (ii) We should therefore welcome a request by Belgium that she should not be a guarantor Power, but should merely give an undertaking to defend her own territory.'⁽³⁰⁾

On 17th September 1936 a memorandum was sent by H.M. Government to the other four Governments who, it was still hoped, would eventually take part in a Five-Power Conference. In this there was a clear expression of the view of H.M. Government as to which Powers should give and which receive guarantees.

'His Majesty's Government', the communication ran, 'would be ready to guarantee the observance of . . . (non-aggression) arrangements as between Germany on the one hand and France and Belgium on the other, in return for similar guarantees for the United Kingdom from France against Germany and from Germany against France.'⁽³¹⁾

During subsequent discussions at Geneva it was learned that the Belgian Government were entirely happy with the suggestion that there should be no Belgian guarantees to the United Kingdom, and hoped that France would agree that there should be no Belgian guarantee to her either. In a conversation with Mr. Eden at Geneva on 28th September, M. Spaak explained and Mr. Eden confirmed that the British suggestion implied that while Belgium would not be a guarantor in future she would insist on respect for her neutrality both by land and by air. M. Spaak further explained that there was some anti-French feeling in Belgium. A gesture by France, showing that her policy was in line with that of Britain in this respect, would be of great help in 'promoting Belgian national unity in support of a national foreign policy'. In other words, if Belgium had

to increase her armaments and her length of military service, then it would be easier for the Belgian Government to get domestic support for such decisions if it was already known that Belgium would not be asked to guarantee France.⁽³²⁾

The French, however, were not happy. And on 22nd October M. Delbos produced a memorandum in which were summed up the arguments against agreeing to an arrangement whereby Belgium while remaining guaranteed by others, would divest herself of every obligation as a guarantor Power. Belgium herself, so the French argued, would be harmed by such a move. Her military collaboration with France, in the event of war, in practice implied only assistance to be rendered by French armies to a Belgium whose territory had been violated or was threatened with violation. In other words, the only likely Franco-Belgian action would be in defence of Belgian territory and not of that of France. At present French assistance took the form 'of intervention, after a very short lapse of time, by the first echelon of important forces. The despatch of these forces after this short lapse of time presupposes a careful preparation in time of peace on the part of the General Staffs of the two armies working in collaboration; and it necessitates close and frequent contacts between these General Staffs'. Once the international status of Belgium had been modified these peace-time preparations would become impossible. French armies would be delayed in giving their help to defend Belgium's frontiers. The Belgians themselves might then be unable to hold the line of the Meuse, and much of Belgium might have to be abandoned to the enemy. And the German General Staff, understanding all this, would be more rather than less likely to plan to invade a Belgium whose territory they in any case needed to invade as much from strategic necessity as from any political motive.

From the point of view of French and British interests, also, the results of Belgium's proposed new status would be 'singularly grave'.

'It will be noted first', argued the French, 'that, should a German offensive in Belgian territory be facilitated for the reasons indicated above, the concentration of the French and British forces, deprived as they would be of the distant Franco-Belgian cover which it would not have been possible to organise in time, might be hindered. But it is, above all, from the point of view of aerial warfare, that the consequences would be serious.'

Depending on the circumstances of the war, France and Britain could lose the use of Belgian airfields or of the Belgian observation service. And if Germany chose to violate both the Belgian territory and Belgian air then, as with land forces, air intervention and co-operation would be much less rapid and its efficacy seriously diminished.

'To sum up', the French note ran, 'the modification of the situation of Belgium in the new treaty would offer grave drawbacks from the point of view of French and British interests.'

As for Belgium herself, since the French and British obligations towards a guarantor Power are identically the same as towards a guarantor Power, this modification would be without practical inconvenience, if preparation could be made in time of peace for the co-operation of the three countries. But, for the reasons indicated above, the most serious doubts must be expressed in this connexion. If these doubts are even in part well founded, the consequences for Belgian security would be grave; in view of the conditions of modern war, having regard at once to the possibility of a German attack by rapid motorised forces and to the technical conditions of French intervention, a minute and continuous preparation for co-operation is particularly necessary. In the absence of such preparation, the French Army would only be able, at the best, to form a rallying point for the Belgian army.'⁽³³⁾

The views of the Belgian and French Governments were then passed to the C.I.D. for comment, and particularly for comment in the light of the view of the Chiefs of Staff, expressed only so recently as 1st September, that 'an effective Belgian neutrality would be greatly to our advantage'. Looking at this matter from the Belgian point of view first, the Chiefs of Staff argued that the Belgian Government had two reasons for its proposed action. Belgian unity, and therefore Belgium's ability to undertake an unpopular defence programme, would be promoted by deliberately renouncing any guarantee to France. The Chiefs of Staff sympathised with and supported this argument. In addition, and much more obviously to the point as the Chiefs of Staff saw it, was Belgium's desire 'to avoid the risk of being drawn into war as a result of French commitments in central and eastern Europe, and particularly as a result of the Franco-Soviet Pact'. With this desire the Chiefs of Staff expressed 'every sympathy', the more so since they themselves had recently underlined the view that Britain, too, should avoid giving any guarantee which would automatically draw her into a war originating from attempts to rectify Germany's eastern frontier.

'... We stressed the necessity', they wrote, 'from the military point of view, for limiting our commitments in Europe, and for undertaking no liability to engage in any war in which our vital interests are not affected. It may be that in any case Belgium's chance of maintaining an effective neutrality throughout a Western war is small; but in our opinion the chance will be very much greater if she is relieved of any guarantees and if her only commitment is an understanding to defend her own territory.'

Moreover, the greater her chance of maintaining her neutrality effectively the less is there likelihood of our being dragged in.'

The Chiefs of Staff then dealt with the French arguments in more detail. First, that Belgium's proposed new status would prevent close collaboration in concerted defence plans between France and Belgium and thus delay the assistance to be given by France after the outbreak of war. There was admitted to be 'some force' in this argument. But there was also much to be said against it. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff had been told, as recently as March 1936, and on the authority of General Gamelin, 'that the French were prepared to support Belgium, only if it was known for certain that the British Field Force was on its way to Belgium'. It therefore seemed probable that this threat to desert Belgium was designed to force Britain into a definite commitment to send the Field Force to Belgium at the outbreak of war, and to undertake those detailed peace-time military talks which such a commitment would imply.

'In these circumstances', the Chiefs of Staff continued, 'we are left with the strong impression that what the French most fear from the Belgian declaration—although they do not admit it—is that the termination of the existing close liaison between the French and Belgian General Staffs will automatically put an end to any hope of the Franco-British military conversations.'

They then repeated their arguments about the ineffectiveness of Staff talks between all the signatories to a multilateral agreement when one Power concerned might later be at war with the others. Staff talks between a limited number of the parties to a multilateral agreement would be invidious, and would involve firm commitments restricting freedom of action when the occasion arose. On this point they concluded:

'Therefore, we again wish to emphasise that, whatever the position of Belgium in any new treaty that may be negotiated, other of course than a definite alliance, we should not be committed to military conversations, either with France or with Belgium.'

The objections of the Chiefs of Staff to the other French arguments were equally emphatic. The French had claimed that the concentration of French and British forces to defend the Franco-Belgian frontier would be delayed by the lack of a pre-concerted plan. 'This argument', they countered, 'assumes, without justification, that we are committed to despatching the Field Force to France at the outset of hostilities'. They disagreed, also, with the view that British and French air forces would be seriously hampered by being

deprived of the Belgian anti-aircraft observation service and anti-aircraft defences, and of the use of Belgian airfields, claiming that 'recent technical developments have reduced the potential value to us' of the former, and that the R.A.F. could operate successfully against the Ruhr from airfields in north-east France. Finally, they were advised by the Foreign Office that, in recent talks, the Belgian Government had 'admitted that there might be ways of getting round those difficulties, even if Belgium gave no express guarantee', a possibility which the Chiefs of Staff thought called 'for the most careful examination'. Circumstances in which this might be done could, perhaps, be defined in a new treaty and were in any case, implied in Article XVI(3) of the Covenant when France and Britain were acting according to the terms of that Article.

All these arguments led the Chiefs of Staff to the conclusion that Belgium should not be asked, in any new treaty designed to replace Locarno, to guarantee the United Kingdom, France or Germany. And to emphasise their convictions, the word 'not' was heavily underlined.⁽³⁴⁾ It is therefore not surprising that, in addition to the fact that there was no treaty—and that for political reasons—there were also no further Staff talks in 1936 or 1937. In the considered, and repeatedly emphasised view of the Chiefs of Staff, the constructive military value of such talks was heavily outweighed by the risk that they might deprive the United Kingdom of her freedom to interfere or not to interfere in European affairs according to the dictates of her own interests. In a world of sovereign nation states policy properly begins from that point of view. What is questionable is whether it was wise, by late 1936, to stop there.

4. *Demand for and Opposition to Further Staff Talks, December 1937–April 1938*

Some months after the events related in the previous section France and Great Britain resolved their differences of view about the status of Belgium. On 24th April 1937, the two Governments, after consultation with the Belgian Government, issued a joint declaration. In this they rehearsed sympathetically the arguments publicly advanced by the Belgian Government on several occasions in favour of Belgium's renunciation of any guarantor responsibilities, and the affirmation of Belgium's commitment to the Covenant of the League and her determination to defend her frontiers against aggression. The declaration by the French and British Governments then went on to state that:

'... they consider Belgium to be now released from all obligations towards them resulting from either the Treaty of Locarno

or the arrangements drawn up in London on 19th March 1936, and that they maintain in respect of Belgium the undertakings of assistance which they entered into towards her under the above-mentioned instruments.'

They then concluded that:

'... the release of Belgium from her obligations ... in no way affects the existing undertakings between the United Kingdom and France.'⁽³⁵⁾

This declaration of policy was welcomed by the Belgian Government. A few days later, on 29th April, the Belgian Foreign Minister, made clear in a speech to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives what he understood the implications of the new Anglo-French policy to be. The period of military agreements was at an end. Belgium's military problems had been freed from superfluous complications, and Belgium herself was now free to provide her own answers to those problems independently. Finally, the Belgian Government was determined to do everything in her power to ensure adequate national defence. 'This statement', according to a Foreign Office analysis later in the year, was interpreted in London '... as meaning that though Belgium would no longer be willing to conduct formal Staff conversations, she would regard herself as being now perhaps even more at liberty than before to enter into confidential military contacts with any Power or Powers she liked to choose'.⁽³⁶⁾

Matters stayed thus throughout the summer and autumn of 1937. Then, in mid-December of that year, Mr. Eden re-opened the debate—at any rate on the British side. In a Foreign Office letter dated 16th December 1937, and addressed to the Secretary of the C.I.D., it was pointed out that the scope of the Staff talks of April 1936 had been deliberately restricted, partly to avoid any implication of political undertakings and partly because it was still then hoped to negotiate a treaty of mutual guarantee between the five Locarno Powers roughly on the model of the former Locarno treaty.⁽³⁷⁾ Now, at the end of 1937, the second reason for the earlier restriction was no longer valid, '... for the prospect of concluding a new Western guarantee pact on the lines previously contemplated is at present very remote'. In the circumstances, and since the 'effort of conciliation' envisaged in the White Paper of 15th April 1936 had failed, it appeared that His Majesty's Government could be called upon to give full effect to the various undertakings given by them to France and Belgium.⁽³⁸⁾

Several things prompted Mr. Eden to re-open the issue of Staff talks at a time when it could have been argued that, at any rate on the surface, there appeared little reason for doing so. First, in talks

with Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Eden on 18th November, M. Spaak had apparently endorsed the Foreign Office view that Belgium considered herself free to undertake Staff talks at her own discretion. Now that they were free from previous French Staff arrangements which had created at least 'an impression of servitude', and in a situation in which the Germans had asked neither for Staff talks nor for military information of any kind, the Belgian Government were 'very ready to continue to give us any information in their power about their defences and their plans generally. If there was any point on which we wished to approach them, they were ready to hear whatever we had to say'. This, in the opinion of the Foreign Office, was 'an offer which it would be well not to leave without response'.⁽³⁹⁾ Second, although the French, like the Belgians, had not insisted on the fulfilment of the terms of the British notes of March and April 1936, their Air Staff had frequently pressed for an extension of the scope of the conversations beyond the limits hitherto imposed upon them. For example, in December 1936, the Deputy Chief of the French Air Staff—who claimed to be expressing the considered views both of M. Blum and of M. Cot, the Minister for Air—urged that the rearmament of Germany called for a joint study by the French and British Air Staffs of the possibility of a single war-time Franco-British air defence front. At that point the Deputy Chief of the French Air Staff had been told that the time was not ripe for further official Staff talks, and that the most useful step which could be taken for the time being was to continue the exchange of views and information between Staffs and Service Attachés as was already being done. Since then the French had more than once pressed to go further.⁽⁴⁰⁾

On the basis of all this Mr. Eden, in December 1937, considered that H.M. Government were 'justified in pursuing, at least on a hypothetical basis, and within certain definite limits, the examination of the common Anglo-French and Anglo-Belgian military problems which would arise in the event of our being called upon to fulfil our obligation to France or Belgium against Germany under the Locarno Treaty'. If, in the event of war, it proved necessary for a substantial portion of the R.A.F. to operate from French or Belgian soil, then the case for such a study, at any rate from the point of view of the R.A.F., was very strong; and since action in war would most probably have to be taken quickly, then it was vitally important to take steps now which might minimise delay in a crisis. Further, co-operation with the French and Belgian Staffs would give to the British authorities not only an opportunity for common planning but also for discovering deficiencies or disorganisation in our potential Allies' forces. Mr. Eden not only argued, however, that the time was opportune for a further development in the contact between

British, French and Belgian Staffs. He said, in addition, that it seemed to him desirable that there should be a greater measure of latitude in any future talks than there had been in the past, and that he believed this was possible within the limits laid down in the exchange of notes in March and April 1936. In summing up his views he asked for a 'generous interpretation' of those limits.⁽⁴¹⁾ A fortnight later Mr. Eden's plea was reinforced by the French Ambassador in London who stressed, in particular, that Staff talks should consider 'co-ordinating the necessary co-operation if it was found necessary to despatch a Fleet to the Far East.'⁽⁴²⁾

Mr. Eden's proposals were forwarded to the Secretary of the C.I.D. and then passed to the Chiefs of Staff Committee for consideration and comment. The result was a Chiefs of Staff memorandum described later by Mr. Eden as showing 'an extraordinary and misplaced reluctance to work with the French and Belgian Chiefs of Staff'. The British Chiefs of Staff opened their memorandum by recalling that 'we have consistently regarded staff conversations with misgivings. The very term staff conversations has a sinister purport, and gives an impression to interested countries, outside the conversation circle, of mutually assumed military collaboration by those partaking which must inevitably lead to mutual military commitments'.⁽⁴³⁾ But in addition to this—which was merely putting somewhat differently an argument frequently advanced before—there was a more immediate reason for opposition to further talks. In so far as suggestions for talks were based on the assumption that, in any war in which the United Kingdom was on the side of France, one of the first measures to be taken would be the despatch of a Field Force to the Continent, then it must be remembered that the Cabinet had recently decided that the despatch of a Field Force to the Continent ranked lowest on the Army's order of priorities.^{(44)*} 'As far as the army is concerned, therefore', the reply of the Chiefs of Staff ran 'we feel that at the present time it would be more appropriate frankly to inform the French of the new situation, rather than to contemplate re-opening staff conversations upon which we, for our part, could only embark empty-handed'.⁽⁴⁵⁾

On the other hand, the Chiefs of Staff admitted that the desire of the French to extend the scope of talks between Air Staffs was logical. Since the British contribution in land forces was to be less, then the importance of her air contribution to the common cause would be enhanced. Moreover, during the next few years, whilst the re-equipment of the R.A.F. was still being carried out, it would be necessary for part of the R.A.F. to use French airfields in the event of war against Germany; and this made talks dealing with

* See also above, p. 472.

such practical problems as airfield areas, fuel supplies and allocation of targets desirable from the purely military point of view. The Chiefs of Staff memorandum, however, then went on:

'In spite of the foregoing considerations which, from the purely military point of view, indicate the desirability of close collaboration with the French to meet the contingency of aggression by Germany, we do not advocate that discussions on the air questions referred to . . . should be authorised. We feel that the opportunity of turning such conversations to their own political advantage would be seized upon by the French with avidity. The temptation to arrange a leakage of the information that such collaboration was taking, or had taken place would, in our opinion, prove irresistible to them in order to flaunt an Anglo-French accord in the face of Germany.

Apart from the deplorable effect of such a leakage upon our present efforts to reach a détente with Germany, it is most important, from the military standpoint, that at the present time we should not appear to have both feet in the French camp.

We consider, therefore, that the military advantages of closer collaboration with the French regarding concerted measures against Germany, however logical they may appear, would be outweighed by the grave risk of precipitating the very situation which we wish to avoid, namely the irreconcilable suspicion and hostility of Germany.'

The Chiefs of Staff then dealt with matters concerning the Royal Navy. The French Ambassador had said that, in view of the tense situation in the Far East, naval staff talks with the French should be begun as soon as possible. The Chiefs of Staff admitted that—

' . . . in the event of our fleet being despatched to the Far East, and with the problem of an improved understanding with Germany still unresolved, we should need the co-operation of the French fleet to assist in the protection of sea communications in the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Home areas.'

They also admitted that, during the Italo-Abyssinian crisis, it became apparent that the redistribution of the French fleet on any considerable scale took far longer than that of the Royal Navy. It therefore followed that, if we had to send a fleet to the Far East, it would be necessary to warn the French as soon as possible in order to ensure their effective co-operation. Nonetheless, and with no explanation whatsoever, the Chiefs of Staff then added that they did not 'consider that immediate staff conversations are necessary to secure this co-operation'.⁽⁴⁶⁾

There remained the problem of land co-operation with the French in the Mediterranean, particularly in view of Mussolini's recent build-up of Italian military strength in Libya.⁽⁴⁷⁾ This matter, or some aspects of it, had been considered in some detail at a meeting of the C.I.D. held a fortnight before the completion of the Chiefs of Staff memorandum we are considering here. At that meeting widely varying views were expressed. Briefly, Ministers were divided between those who argued that the moral to be drawn from Italian actions was that we should concert defence measures in the Mediterranean with the French and draw up joint plans to meet an Italian threat; others took the view that to make plans with the French at this juncture would be the likeliest way to antagonise Italy and so bring to a head the threat we wished to remove. It was then decided to leave open the matter of Staff talks with the French until the Chiefs of Staff had made their report.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The Chiefs of Staff were in no doubt. There certainly would be some important advantages in co-operation with the French in the Mediterranean; in a war against Italy a French threat against Libya from Tunisia would almost certainly reduce the scale of Italian attack on Egypt. Again, the Royal Navy would be seriously handicapped without the use of facilities at Toulon and Bizerta. But they continued:

'We do not, however, consider that conversations at the present time with the French on the above points should be entertained. Even without French co-operation and base facilities, we should have no doubt in our own minds as to the final outcome of a unilateral war between the United Kingdom and Italy. It is possible, in our view, that in such a war the French might stand aside, and in that event that Germany also might not become engaged. If, on the other hand, France were in alliance with us against Italy, Germany would be almost certain to come in against us, with the consequent risk of a world conflagration, the outcome of which we should view with much less confidence. We are, therefore, opposed to any approach to the French at the present time regarding the situation in the Mediterranean.'

In conclusion, the Chiefs of Staff advised firmly against the Foreign Secretary's suggestions that Staff talks with the French should now be permitted on a more generous interpretation of the limits set in 1936 than had been accepted hitherto. It was sufficient, they claimed, to continue with the ordinary procedure of exchange of visits combined with the normal interchange of information by Service Attachés. And they took the same view about future contacts with Belgium.⁽⁴⁹⁾

This particular report has been dealt with at some length for two

reasons. First, it shows the Chiefs of Staff offering advice with an unusual degree of political implication. There was nothing, in principle, wrong in this. The whole process of co-ordination which began with the setting up of the C.I.D. was designed to prevent Ministers and their advisers from thinking in separation. It followed that political and military factors must be taken into account by all of them, even if the mixture properly varied according to the individual or committee involved. But, in fact, the Chiefs of Staff—for example in their annual surveys—normally accepted political guidance from the Departments consulted before any survey was prepared.* On this occasion, in a report that was admittedly not an annual survey but was certainly one which carried major political implications, the Chiefs of Staff opposed the Foreign Office view and that to some considerable extent on political grounds. Second, this report illustrates the extent to which the Chiefs of Staff, as late as the beginning of 1938, attempted to keep open the way for a detente with Germany, a policy which subsequently acquired the label 'appeasement'. To say this, in this context, is in no way intended to carry the implication of condemnation or approval. It is simply a statement of facts which should be borne in mind when trying to assess what appeasement meant and who believed in it.

Eden's memorandum together with the comments of the Chiefs of Staff just summarised came to the Cabinet on 16th February 1938.^{(52)†} The discussion revealed some interesting similarities and differences between the views of Ministers and those of their military advisers. Ministers took the view that it was advisable to look at the three Services separately in terms of Staff talks. Recent Cabinet decisions about the rôle of the Army, placing a Continental commitment lowest in its order of priorities, demanded that, in honesty, the French should be told that 'if the obligation involved in the Treaty of Locarno should arise and the Government of the day, after considering our other military commitments at home and abroad, should decide to despatch a military force to France', then the most we could send would be 'two Regular divisions and a mobile division within three weeks, followed by two further Regular Divisions in 'Z' plus 40 days. These divisions would be equipped for general purposes and not with special reference to a continental campaign'. The implication here was that this was a form of co-operation that Ministers considered undesirable and of little value to the French, therefore rendering Staff talks unnecessary. It was also agreed that,

* This normal practice had, in fact, been broken on at least one previous occasion. The C.O.S. Review of Imperial Defence prepared for the Imperial Conference of 1937⁽⁵⁰⁾ was prepared somewhat differently and criticised as being 'too political' by a subsequent C.I.D. Meeting⁽⁵¹⁾.

† This meeting took place only a few days before Mr. Eden's resignation.

although the co-operation of the French Navy in Mediterranean, Atlantic and Home Waters would be necessary if the Royal Navy had to despatch a fleet to the Far East, Staff talks on these matters were not necessary at the moment. So far, this represented general agreement with the Chiefs of Staff.

But there were two important differences. The minutes of the Cabinet meeting do not record that any one, at any point in the discussion, expressed the view (as the Chiefs of Staff had done) that the French were likely to take matters into their own hands if they felt assured of United Kingdom assistance. The Prime Minister pointed out that the political commitments reaffirmed in the White Paper of March 1936 entailed military obligations; moreover, it appeared that the French authorities were very anxious for Staff talks, no doubt with the object of defining or at any rate ascertaining the military contribution which we intended to make. It had been suggested to him that the time was not ripe for Staff talks to become public knowledge; but what he and his colleagues now thought desirable, so far as the R.A.F. was concerned, was not designed for publicity but merely to keep faith with the French Government and to make certain enquiries which were indispensable to effective co-operation without, at the same time, incurring a specific commitment. On this same point Mr. Eden argued that, in view of the fact that we had a political commitment, then past experience suggested that if it became known that we were prepared to implement the commitment then the situation might be made easier rather than more dangerous. And this was a point of view to which the Prime Minister gave strong support.

What the Cabinet decided, so far as the R.A.F. was concerned, was that Mr. Eden should be authorised to tell the French that H.M. Government were prepared to authorise confidential communications on a purely technical footing between the British and French Air Staffs as to the airfields and other facilities which would be required by the R.A.F. should a decision be made to begin actual operations with the French. In addition it was clearly stated that these talks would be begun by Air Attachés, but might be continued by exchange visits and perhaps include visits by officers of the R.A.F. to French airfields. A warning was, however, to be given that the R.A.F. would become progressively less dependent on French airfields and facilities as its longer range aircraft came into service.⁽⁵³⁾

On 6th April, without anything practical having been accomplished in the meantime, a further Cabinet discussion on the matter of staff talks took place. Two problems had arisen. First, when and exactly how to tell the French of our very limited Army support for them in a major Continental war. Such an announcement was expected to give the French a shock at a time when, for domestic

reasons, they were least prepared to receive it. Second, at an earlier meeting, the Cabinet had raised, though it had also temporarily reserved, the question whether the talks already agreed to for Air Staffs should be extended to Army Staffs as well.⁽⁵⁴⁾ At the Cabinet meeting on 6th April Lord Halifax* said that he favoured an extension of Staff talks to include the Army (though not the Royal Navy at present) on the ground that once talks between the Air Staffs began there would be a demand (presumably from the French since the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was still opposed to talks) for their extension to the Army as well. Moreover, he was opposed to telling the French of our very limited commitment until the exact scope of Staff talks had been finally decided.

The longest and most interesting—as well as the most important—comments were made by the Prime Minister. He recalled the opposition shown by the Chiefs of Staff hitherto to Staff talks, and pointed out that they had been persuaded only with hesitation to agree to what had been decided on so far, i.e. talks more or less *sub rosa* between Air Attachés. He considered it an anomalous position that H.M. Government should have accepted obligations and taken no steps to make them good. He could not reconcile the acceptance of such obligations with the frequent rejection of French approaches which only meant that our action would not be decided until the actual emergency arose. His opinion in this matter had been reinforced by what had recently happened in Austria. In modern warfare the aggressor was able to move so quickly that there was little time to make plans; he, therefore, thought that all concerned would be much easier in their minds if each knew what part the other could play. Mr. Chamberlain was quite clear that the Chiefs of Staff ought not to be asked to engage in talks without clear instructions as to their scope, and this involved several prior decisions. But he thought that, in all probability, the Royal Navy should be included as well. And he recommended to his colleagues, in order to come to a final decision on the ground to be covered by talks, that the whole matter should be referred back to the D.P.(P) for examination and report.†

Towards the end of the meeting Mr. Hore-Belisha, Secretary of State for War, referred once more to the views of the Chiefs of Staff, since the reference back to the D.P.(P) would almost certainly involve taking their advice once again. Mr. Hore-Belisha reminded his colleagues that nearly all the objections raised by the Chiefs of Staff to Staff talks, so far, had been political; had they been made on military grounds he would have supported them. But it was the Cabinet's responsibility to decide on wider grounds of policy. He

* Lord Halifax had succeeded Mr. Eden as Foreign Secretary.

† The phrase used in the minutes of the Cabinet meeting is 'to the Committee of Imperial Defence (Planning)'.

therefore suggested that, if the matter were referred once more to the Chiefs of Staff, then the latter should be asked to give their military advice on matters about which a political decision had already been made.

Mr. Hore-Belisha's suggestion was accepted by the Cabinet as a whole. It was decided that the proposed Staff talks should now be extended to Navy and Army Staffs and that they should not be limited to the channel of Service Attachés. The whole question of the scope of the talks was to be referred back to the D.P.(P) on the understanding that, if the Chiefs of Staff were to be consulted again, then their deliberations were to be based on the decisions outlined in the previous sentence.⁽⁵⁵⁾

There now occurred a change in Ministers' views about Staff talks which it is not easy to explain. The change was one from what appeared to be a determination to expand the scope of such talks, both in the letter and in spirit, to a degree of caution which matched the consistently unwilling attitude of the Chiefs of Staff. Although the Cabinet and C.I.D. records disclose the superficial reasons for this change they do not—as so often they do not—reveal the deeper and more satisfying explanation.

As had been expected, the D.P.(P) did again ask for the advice of the Chiefs of Staff, asking them to report on the scope of possible Staff talks in terms of the needs of the three Services. In making the new report for which they had been asked the Chiefs of Staff made several explicit assumptions including, first, that what they had to say now was said without any reference to a recent report they had made on the military implications of German aggression against Czechoslovakia and, second, that they must consider the alternative situations of a hostile and a neutral Italy.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The positive aspect of their report was then based on the assumption that any Staff conversations with the French and/or Belgian Governments would be entered into in order to make possible the honouring of the pledge, given to those Governments on 1st April 1936, that the United Kingdom—

'Will immediately come to the assistance of your Government in accordance with the Treaty of Locarno, in respect of any measures which may be jointly decided upon.'⁽⁵⁷⁾

In this setting the Chiefs of Staff considered the scope of possible talks in terms of the needs of each of the three Services. So far as the Navy was concerned, they pointed out that, with the simple situation of Germany attacking France, then the only areas involved would be the North Sea, the English Channel and the Atlantic. But if Italy joined Germany then talks must cover the Mediterranean and Red Sea areas. Moreover, 'in view of the radical nature of the

redistribution of our naval forces necessary if Japan should turn hostile, and the much greater extent to which, in these circumstances, we must rely on France in European waters, it will be desirable to extend the conversations to include the possibility of a hostile Japan'.⁽⁵⁸⁾

So far as the Army was concerned the Chiefs of Staff advice was that conversations should deal with France, North Africa and the Mediterranean bases. But—and as a condition to discussions about any of these areas—it must be made clear that our first and main effort must be directed to home defence and the preservation of our trade routes, including the defence of British territories overseas. Only after these objectives had been secured could a Continental commitment be considered. Talks dealing with the employment of the Army in northern France should cover such topics as ports of disembarkation and movement to assembly areas; concentration areas could be decided on only in the light of the general strategic situation at the time the force was actually despatched. In April 1938 only two divisions—with an incomplete quota of corps troops and deficient in many types of equipment essential for war in modern conditions—could be put into the field. By April 1939 two additional divisions—similarly deficient—could be despatched. By April 1940 the Mobile Division would also be available. By then the force would be provided with up-to-date armament and equipment, with the exception of medium and heavy artillery, but two out of the four infantry divisions would have reserves only on a scale much lower than that regarded as essential for a war under modern conditions. These forces, if used on the Continent would, in other words, be capable of holding a defensive sector and also of local counter-attack to secure their positions; but they would not have sufficient equipment or reserves to take part in any major offensive action. The Chiefs of Staff then added a warning reminiscent of their earlier doubts. It would be impossible to reinforce the above divisions—under present arrangements—for a year or more after the outbreak of hostilities. The French General Staff on the other hand, as in 1914, would expect that once we were committed to military co-operation we would, in fact, be committed to co-operation on a much larger scale. If our original forces were to be wiped out or in any other way prove inadequate, it was difficult to see how an expanding commitment could in fact, be avoided. Were the French to be told categorically that the four divisions in 1939 was all they could expect?

The recommended scope of air talks was wider, including capacity, plans, problems of co-operation in stocking and air defence, and co-operation throughout the world with the naval forces of the two Powers. Nonetheless, in disclosing our own plans we were bound to make it clear to the French that the first commitment of the R.A.F.

was the defence of this country against air attack. Moreover, since we were at present and for some time were likely to remain too weak to defend ourselves effectively, we would have no margin of air power in hand to enable us to help in the defence of France, except in so far as any action to reduce the scale of attack on England would automatically contribute to the defence of France. In any case, we would be in no position to co-operate in any offensive operations which the French might have in mind.

'We think it possible', wrote the Chiefs of Staff, 'that the French may have an exaggerated idea of our present real strength in the air, and, . . . we consider it essential that each side should have no illusions as to the real state of the other's forces, or the period for which their scale of reserves will enable them to carry out operations.'⁽⁵⁹⁾

This report, completed on 8th April, was considered in great detail only three days later by the C.I.D.⁽⁶⁰⁾ At that meeting each Chief of Staff introduced the section of the report concerned with his own Service chiefly by emphasising the limits which should be imposed on French expectations. Ministers carried the process further. It was as though, having seen in some detail the possible results of their own earlier temerity, they now drew back in consternation. The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip, said that the impression he had gained from the report

' . . . was that the scope of the conversations as contemplated by the Chiefs of Staff went rather further than preparation for the fulfilment of our obligations to France and Belgium, and in effect envisaged an alignment of Europe into two opposite camps and a world war'.

One would hardly have known from this that it was the Chiefs of Staff themselves who, only shortly before, had by implication been accused of proposing too little rather than too much. The Prime Minister, moreover, took up the same theme. To him—

'The report seemed to go rather further than the Cabinet had in mind when the question of staff conversations was recently discussed. From a practical point of view, there were advantages in approaching the problem on a rather narrower basis, i.e. that Germany was the aggressor against France or Belgium, that we came in in accordance with our Locarno obligations, and that the rest of the world was neutral. Once the simple setting was exceeded, a number of hypothetical and highly speculative alternatives came into the picture. For instance it was now an unnecessary complication to assume the hostility of Italy. Six months ago this might have been necessary: but not

today. Similarly, the hostility of Japan was by no means certain. If Japan were to be included as an enemy, then the attitude of the U.S.S.R. and the United States of America would be pertinent factors.'

The weakness of Mr. Chamberlain's criticism, justified though it was up to a point, was that it was as much of an extreme as that of the Chiefs of Staff, optimistic—at least by implication—where theirs was pessimistic. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, supported the Prime Minister in his suggestion that consideration of a hostile Italy should be excluded from the scope of the conversations. 'Mussolini was undoubtedly anxious to achieve agreement with us, and things were going well.' And, since the principal reason for extending the talks to cover operations in the Mediterranean was the possibility of trouble with Japan, he gave it as his view that Japan was too occupied in China to be in any shape to promote trouble with the British Empire. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, went further.

'The impression made upon him by the report was that it did not envisage the kind of war that seemed most probable. In a war against Germany our own home defence would be the crucial problem. The French would take up a defensive position behind their Maginot Line. Their Air Force was of low efficiency. The problem before us was to win "the war over London". In order to do so we might have to station certain squadrons of our Advanced Air Striking Force in France. He . . . viewed the prospect of the despatch of a field force with the gravest misgivings. We should need, at any rate in the initial stages, all our available troops to assist in the defence of this country. . . . In his view the conversations should be limited to the discussion of requirements in connection with aerodrome accommodation for our Advanced Air Striking Force in France.'

Summing up the main part of the discussion the Prime Minister said that there appeared to him to be a general agreement that the political assumption on which Staff talks should be based was that of a war arising out of Britain's treaty obligations, with herself, France and Belgium ranged against Germany, and the rest of the world neutral. Further, it would be unsound for Britain to go into talks on a pre-1914 basis and to be committed to any military co-operation on the Continent. It was difficult to imagine a strategic plan into which our own small Field Force would fit. The most likely eventuality appeared to be a German air attack against the United Kingdom, with the French staying behind the Maginot Line and the Germans facing them. In such circumstances we could hardly contemplate sending our small Field Force to help defend that line. His view was that we should make it clear to the French that we could not commit ourselves to sending any military force to the Con-

continent, except such troops as were necessary for the protection of lines of communication and for the security of an Advanced Air Striking Force. 'We should impress upon them the importance of both countries safeguarding their brain centres and their wealth.' To all this he added that he saw no urgent need, at present, for naval staff talks, in part at least because Germany might use them as a reason to denounce the Anglo-German Naval Treaty.

The only clear disagreement with this line of argument was introduced by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Duff Cooper. He argued:

'... that if one of our objectives was to reassure the French, it seemed doubtful if the scope of the conversations now contemplated would have that effect. They would take little comfort from the information which we had to give them as to the rôle of the Army, and we were not apparently to be forthcoming over air co-operation. With regard to the Navy, the general opinion was that no conversations were required.* In his view, we should not be able to escape, in the event of war against Germany, sending a field force to the Continent. It was impossible to contemplate France with her back to the wall and three million young men in this country in plain clothes.'

To which the Prime Minister's reply—which it is difficult to describe as other than disingenuous in the light of what had already been said in Cabinet discussions—was that he had never been dogmatic about the possibility of our having ultimately to send a large army to the Continent; it was simply that we should not base our plans on that particular possibility. The object of Staff talks, as he saw it, was not so much to reassure the French as to place ourselves in the best position to be able to discharge our treaty obligations.⁽⁶¹⁾

The report of this discussion in the C.I.D., together with the Chiefs of Staff paper on which it was based, was then considered in detail by the full cabinet on 13th April. No changes of any significance were made in the recommendations already formulated by the C.I.D. The political basis of the Staff talks was to be the fulfilment of the undertaking to go to the help of France and/or Belgium in the event of unprovoked aggression by Germany, an undertaking given in the original Treaty of Locarno in 1925 and reaffirmed in March 1936. In view of the satisfactory progress so far made in talks with the Italian Government, and of the great importance of doing nothing calculated either to jeopardise the conclusion of an agreement with Italy or to weaken it once made, it was considered undesirable to extend the scope of Staff talks to include the Mediterranean. In other words, in the circumstances for which military plans were now

* i.e. on the assumption of a neutral Italy. (Author's note).

being envisaged, Italy would be assumed to be a neutral. Further, in view of the extent to which Japan was committed in China, it was considered unnecessary at present to extend the scope of Staff talks to cover the Far East. To sum up, Germany alone was assumed to be the aggressor, and the talks were not to be allowed to comprehend the extension of the war to other nations, whether as allies or enemies. Finally,

‘... the military background of the Conversations should be, not a repetition of 1914, but war of the character envisaged by the Committee of Imperial Defence, in which the course of action most likely to be adopted by Germany is believed to involve an attempted knock-out blow. However, in view of the strength of the Maginot Line, this is less likely to be directed against France than against the industrial and other resources of this country, which are especially vulnerable to air attack.’

On this basis naval talks were unnecessary and, indeed, might be dangerous in view of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, ‘to the maintenance of which the Admiralty attach great importance’. Army Staff talks were also unnecessary in view both of the likely course of war and the extremely limited Army contribution we could make. Air Staff talks were recommended, but strictly on the basis that ‘the primary object of our Air Striking Force is the defence of this country’. Further, the Secretary of State for Air was instructed to ensure that, during the course of the talks, those taking part did not lose sight of the expectation of help from the French Air Force should the main German attack, as the C.I.D. believed possible, be directed against the United Kingdom in the air.⁽⁶²⁾

A fortnight later, on 27th April 1938, these matters were again discussed at a Cabinet meeting. Two conclusions were reached. First that the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary (who were shortly to discuss with French Ministers the broad political setting and scope of Staff talks) should be free, if they thought it necessary and desirable, to include the Army as well as the Air Force in the ultimate conversations. Second, that the Foreign Secretary ‘should consider making an appropriate communication to the German Government in order to deter them from taking an exaggerated view of the importance of the proposed Staff Conversations’.⁽⁶³⁾

5. *Anglo-French Staff Talks, 1938*

Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Halifax had meetings with M. Daladier, President of the Council, and M. Bonnet, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in London on 28th and 29th April.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The French Ministers had some doubts about excluding Italy as a potential

enemy, particularly since a good deal seemed to depend on reaching a generally satisfactory settlement of the Spanish situation. But, broadly speaking, both Governments were at one in seeking to reach agreement with Italy, even though their individual problems were different and also the degree of optimism with which they looked for a solution of them.

Lord Halifax, summarising the results of the lengthy discussions that had recently taken place in the C.I.D. and the Cabinet, explained at length the range of risks which, in the view of H.M. Government, might result in a war involving the United Kingdom, France and Germany, and the extent of the help the United Kingdom could give France in such circumstances. In reply M. Daladier expressed satisfaction with the proposals concerning Air Staff talks. But he was quite clearly dissatisfied with British proposals concerning armies and navies. He started from the premise that it was wrong to regard defence as something which could be cut up into sections; the co-operation of all forces was necessary. 'He therefore considered it indispensable that H.M. Government should agree to analogous steps being taken in the case of the two armies to those which were proposed for the two air forces. The air force and the army had to work in the closest co-operation. He did not criticise the suggested contribution of only two divisions. He did ask, however, that the two divisions should be motorised.'* He asked, further, for an agreement to naval talks so as to 'effect the contacts which would immediately become necessary in time of war'.

The interesting feature of the French views was that they showed no shock at the limits on the size of Britain's contribution on land. Indeed, while admitting that two British divisions would not be a contribution of capital importance in the event of war, M. Daladier nonetheless argued that 'they would have a great moral importance. For example, they might influence Belgium in deciding whether to remain neutral or not, and their presence in France might permit the French Government to remove troops from the northern frontier, and to concentrate them on the eastern frontier'. Staff talks to consider how to effect the transportation and installation of these divisions would be sufficient for the present.

Against this reasonableness Mr. Chamberlain developed a new line of argument. The power of the defensive in warfare—already emphasised by M. Daladier—had increased with modern methods and modern weapons. Forms of attack previously thought of as irresistible could now be met with a sufficiently organised defence.†

* The exact meaning of motorised was not made clear.

† It is not clear where Mr. Chamberlain had found the inspiration for these views, except perhaps from M. Daladier. Certainly this was not a line of thought developed during the preceding Cabinet discussions.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Unfortunately, however, the power of the offensive in German military preparations had been developed more rapidly than the defensive measures of France and the United Kingdom, thus catching the latter of the two Powers to some extent unawares. Their policy, therefore, should aim at securing a respite in order to develop their defensive resources 'to such an extent that, even if the power of the offensive on the other side had meanwhile developed at an increasing pace, we would then be able to regard it calmly and to resist an offensive victoriously if necessary. At the present moment we were, however, very far from this position and were extremely vulnerable'. These considerations, Mr. Chamberlain further argued, were of some importance in relation to Staff talks. Germany and Italy had drawn close together, even if that had not yet resulted in alliance. It was true that talks between Italy and the United Kingdom already, and talks between Italy and France still to come, would probably weaken the Axis to some extent. But

'In view of the weakness of our present defensive position, he thought it necessary to be very careful not to undo any good which had been achieved by these conversations with Italy by exciting Italian or German suspicions that we were now devising fresh military, naval or aerial combinations designed to injure those two Powers.'

This seemed particularly relevant to Naval Staff talks.

In the end, however, the very moderation of the French approach won the day. Mr. Chamberlain now agreed that the forthcoming talks should include all three Services. But the concession was very limited. Naval talks were agreed to only 'in principle', and were to take place only as opportunity occurred. Army talks were to be limited in two ways. H.M. Government were prepared to agree that these should deal with the necessary arrangements for the disembarkation and installation of up to two divisions 'on the purely hypothetical basis that the two British divisions might be sent to France within fifteen days of the outbreak of war if the Government of the day so decide'. Second, H.M. Government were not willing to equip those divisions specifically for a war on the Continent rather than for the general purposes at present envisaged for them. And this second condition arose not from any hesitations about expense. It was based on the argument that the

'British public were . . . very nervous about land commitments, and His Majesty's Government were anxious to avoid being drawn unconsciously and against their will into any engagements regarding the assistance they could render on land in a

continental war which might prevent them utilising British armed forces in the way considered most desirable in the national interests on the outbreak of war.'⁽⁶⁶⁾

On Wednesday, 4th May, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary reported in detail to the Cabinet on their talks with the French Ministers. The other Members of the Cabinet confirmed the decision taken at the meetings on 28th-29th April to extend Staff talks to all three Services. Only two points seem to have been discussed in detail. It appeared from a recent despatch from Sir Nevile Henderson, our Ambassador in Berlin, that Field Marshal Goering already regretted the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935 and was looking for a chance to escape from its restrictions. Naval Staff talks with the French might provide him with an excuse to do so. Mr. Duff Cooper, First Lord of the Admiralty, made it clear that his view was that the Germans would denounce the naval treaty anyway, and whenever it suited them; moreover, it did not seem to him reasonable to have Staff talks with the French on army and air force matters and to exclude the navies. Lord Halifax also believed that naval staff talks would not aggravate the situation *vis-à-vis* Germany, although whether because they would give no offence or because the Germans were past being offended was not made clear. The second point on which discussion settled was that of the mechanisation or motorisation of the two divisions we might send to France in the event of war. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were firm that they had made no commitment in this matter, and the minutes do not record that any Minister challenged them.⁽⁶⁷⁾

The Cabinet having approved the general lines on which Staff talks were to take place, the Foreign Secretary was then authorised to consult the Chiefs of Staff on matters of detail.⁽⁶⁸⁾ The latter quickly completed a report which was discussed at a Cabinet meeting on 25th May.⁽⁶⁹⁾ At that meeting, as at the earlier meeting just described, only two points in connection with Staff talks prompted detailed discussion. The Chiefs of Staff had suggested that among the naval items listed for inclusion in the Staff talks should be 'proposed dispositions for war'. Some Ministers objected that in so far as there was, in 1914, a commitment to France arising out of the Staff talks of previous years, then it had arisen not so much out of the Army Staff talks as out of the Naval talks leading to the concentration of the French naval forces in the Mediterranean and of the British in Atlantic and Home Waters. The counter to this, however, was that naval talks could hardly take place without an exchange of information with regard to proposed dispositions for war, and the objection was overruled. The Army commitment was also discussed in detail again. Ministers were doubtful whether the Chiefs of Staff, in their

recent report, were emphatic enough that H.M. Government were not committed to sending even two divisions to France on the outbreak of war. It was urged, and agreed, that it should be made clear to the French that their plans must be made quite independently of the assumption of even this amount of co-operation. Moreover, since the Chiefs of Staff had insisted, and that with the approval of Ministers, that Army talks should deal only with disembarkation and 'movement up to and including the assembly area' and that there 'should be no question of arranging concentration areas', it followed that the French would have to make their initial plans on the assumption that, at the outbreak of war, they must occupy the whole of their front.

Staff conversations were then authorised by the Cabinet on the following basis, very largely as already recommended by the Chiefs of Staff. They were to take place through the medium of Service Attachés, and any attempt by the French to raise the talks above that level was to be resisted. Our Military Attaché was to make it clear that only two divisions would be available at the outset of war and that there was no commitment to send even them. There would be plenty of time to discuss the matter of reinforcements, if any, after the outbreak of war. Contacts with the Belgians, over and above those already existing between our Military Attaché in Brussels and the Belgian General Staff, were to be confined to conversations at the Attaché level on certain specified air matters, thus making possible a public statement that contacts with the Belgians were being maintained only in the normal way. Finally, it was decided that there would be no advantage, from the military point of view, in entering into triangular talks with the French and Belgians so long as the scope of Staff talks was kept within the limits outlined above.

In November 1938 the Chiefs of Staff reported on the progress that had been made in the Staff talks of the summer as a background to further talks which, it was already anticipated, the French would ask for in the light of the post-Munich situation. So far as the Navy was concerned, useful information had been exchanged making possible concerted naval action with the French in the event of war against Germany alone, although nothing approaching the formulation of detailed plans for joint dispositions and operations had been attempted. If war against Italy was to be taken into account, then there was much more detailed work to be done and Staff talks would have to be carried on at a higher level than that sanctioned so far. Plans for the despatch of two divisions and of the advanced air striking force, and for their movement to the assembly area, were more or less complete. There had been no discussion on the subsequent employment of the force, even of its concentration areas, since

this would commit us to a specific part in the French plan. Much had been done to concert arrangements for the air forces; and talks on such matters as air-raid warning systems, aircraft recognition, safety lanes for aircraft, though still desirable, could be cleared up within presently authorised discussions.⁽⁷⁰⁾

In drawing up this report the Chiefs of Staff also reminded Ministers of two items of a general character on which the Staff talks of the summer of 1938 had been based. First, they had been conducted entirely at Service Attaché level. Presumably the implication of this was that matters of policy, as distinct from those of method, had been avoided once the initial scope of staff talks had been defined by Ministers. Second, those talks had been carried out on the assumption that, in the event of war with Germany, there would be a period, the length of which could not be forecast, during which Italy would be neutral. This second limitation arose out of a C.I.D. discussion of a Chief of Staff paper reviewing war plans, with particular reference to the German-Czechoslovak crisis* in May 1938.⁽⁷¹⁾ In their analysis of the current military situation the Chiefs of Staff pointed out that one of their most serious problems was that of the distribution of the Royal Navy to cope with a situation in which it might find itself opposed by the navies of Germany and Italy. The German side of the problem was the more serious and would involve the redistribution of the Fleet in order to bring greater strength to bear, in Home Waters, against Germany's modern vessels. Such a redistribution would almost certainly leave us below strength in the Mediterranean for a critical period of a few weeks. From the Chiefs of Staff point of view, therefore, it was important to keep Italy neutral as long as possible, a cry repeated at intervals for the next eighteen months.† It became clear from the discussion at the C.I.D. meeting that both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary believed that, in view of the Anglo-Italian Agreement, Italy was unlikely to make an unprovoked attack on the British Empire, and was likely to remain neutral for a while, after the outbreak of hostilities, to see which side was likely to prove successful. Finally, the Chiefs of Staff were to be notified if the international situation developed in such a way as to render this assumption invalid. The practical effect of this—and it was a modification of the earlier instruction to conduct the talks on the simple basis of Italian neutrality—was that the Admiralty was to prepare two sets of plans for naval dispositions, the first to cope with Germany alone, the second to cope with Italy also.

* The crisis referred to arose out of troop concentrations and the Cheb incident of 21st May.

† See above, Chapter X, Sections 2 and 3.

6. *The Problem of Czechoslovakia, 1938*

The story of German-Czechoslovak relations culminating in the crisis of September 1938, is not dealt with separately in this volume simply because the events of that summer did not immediately affect the broad development of Britain's rearmament or her plans for national defence. Nonetheless there were important discussions, both within the Cabinet and the Committees of the C.I.D., and together with the French, about the implications of possible German aggression against Czechoslovakia. The relevance of these discussions here is that they heavily underlined the unwillingness of Mr. Chamberlain's administration to accept Continental commitments and, therefore, to engage in Staff talks which might seem to imply that such commitments had been undertaken.

Immediately after the Anschluss between Germany and Austria in March 1938, the Chiefs of Staff were asked by the Prime Minister to examine and report upon the military implications of German aggression against Czechoslovakia. The Chiefs of Staff based their report upon two hypothetical alternatives. First, that the United Kingdom would act with France, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Roumania, Hungary, Turkey and Greece—or any of them—to resist the use of force by Germany against Czechoslovakia. Second, that the United Kingdom would promise to help France were France compelled to fulfil her obligations to Czechoslovakia. The conclusions of the Chiefs of Staff were quite clear.

'We conclude', they wrote, 'that no pressure that we and our possible Allies can bring to bear, either by sea, or land or in the air, could prevent Germany from invading and overrunning Bohemia and from inflicting a decisive defeat on the Czechoslovakian Army. We should then be faced with the necessity of undertaking a war against Germany for the purpose of restoring Czechoslovakia's lost integrity and this object would only be achieved by the defeat of Germany and as the outcome of a prolonged struggle. In the world situation today, it seems to us that if such a struggle were to take place it is more than probable that both Italy and Japan would seize the opportunity to further their own ends, and that in consequence the problem we have to envisage is not that of a limited European war only, but of a world war'.

And they then went on to refer to their earlier view that they could not foresee the time when, with the help of France and other allies or not, 'our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously'. So far as Germany herself was concerned they argued

that the one form of hostile action the United Kingdom could currently reckon to undertake was that of economic pressure exerted almost entirely by naval action. But this was bound to be a slow-acting form of pressure, irrelevant in the context of a short war and of even more doubtful value if Japan decided to act against us. Finally, many of our possible allies in such a war were of doubtful military value and we ourselves, certainly in 1938, were at a stage in our rearmament when we were quite definitely not yet ready for war.⁽⁷²⁾

When, a little later, the Chiefs of Staff reported at length on the possible scope of Staff talks with France and Belgium—the report whose consequences were examined in the previous section of this Chapter—they made it clear, as we have already seen, that they did so without any reference to possible action considered under the two alternative lines of policy recently considered in their paper on the implications of German aggression against Czechoslovakia.^{(73)*} Hence Czechoslovakia was not discussed, at the Ministerial meetings on 28th–29th April, under the heading of Staff talks. When, however, the question of Czechoslovakia did come up for discussion separately at those meetings, a clear difference appeared between the French and British points of view.

Broadly, the French point of view was that they were prepared to urge further concessions on Dr. Benes in the hope that Germany's Sudetenland demands could be met. But there was a limit beyond which the French would not go with an ally on whom they had already brought pressure to bear. Moreover, if the French Government were to agree to intervene yet again at Prague then M. Daladier thought it essential to make it clear that, if reasonable concessions were not accepted by Germany, then France and the United Kingdom would be prepared to support the Czechoslovak Government in action to prevent the dismemberment of their country. Every reasonable effort should be made to avoid war. But a German policy designed to tear up treaties and destroy the equilibrium of Europe should not be tolerated, and France and the United Kingdom should say so; otherwise other central and eastern European countries, lacking a lead, would join in to share the spoils and then succumb themselves. What M. Daladier and M. Bonnet wanted, at this point, was a commitment from H.M. Government to take a firm line. And they did not consider the military situation so hopeless that such a policy would be impossible to implement. In any case 'the military situation was really determined by the political situation and could be decided by the determination shown by statesmen'.

* See above, p. 642. This limitation was then fully accepted by the Cabinet.⁽⁷⁴⁾

Lord Halifax and Mr. Chamberlain were the reverse of encouraging in their own comments on what might be done by France and Great Britain to help Czechoslovakia. The Foreign Secretary told the French representatives that the Chiefs of Staff had made a full examination of the Czechoslovak problem from the military point of view while Ministers had looked at the political background in the light of events, for example, in Russia and in Poland. The result of their investigations of the issues at stake 'was that, if the German Government decided to take hostile steps against the Czechoslovak State, it would be impossible, in our present military situation, to prevent those steps from achieving immediate success'. As a purely military proposition it then followed that any re-establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia would have to await the outcome of a war, perhaps a long one and, even then, it might not be possible to re-establish Czechoslovakia on its present basis.

'In these circumstances, His Majesty's Government regarded it as essential that both Governments should agree that every effort should be made by Dr. Benes to reach a settlement of the German minority problem in Czechoslovakia in negotiations with representatives of that minority, and that both His Majesty's Government and the French Government should use all their influence, preferably jointly, to further such a settlement. He regarded it as essential that such a settlement should be reached in direct negotiations with Herr Henlein's party.'⁽⁷⁵⁾

However desirable it might be to prevent Germany from thinking that she could get whatever she wanted yet, at the same time, it would be embarrassing to encourage Dr. Benes to propose terms which we would be unable, in the long run, to support and render effective.

Mr. Chamberlain fully supported Lord Halifax. He made three points. First, that Dr. Benes should be asked to go as far as he could in proposing conditions on which a settlement of the Sudeten question might be based, but should not be asked to accept terms which would, in effect, mean the destruction of his country. Second, that at the same time Dr. Benes should be told quite clearly of the limits of the support he might expect from France and Great Britain if negotiations failed. And third—and this in amplification of the second point—Mr. Chamberlain did not consider that France and Great Britain were strong enough to make victory certain should they be involved in war against Germany as a result of their failure to help negotiate a settlement. In other words, he could not accept M. Daladier's proposal that Germany should be told that if she refused to negotiate and, instead, took the law into her own hands and used force against Czechoslovakia, then the Western Powers

would at some point declare war on Germany themselves. He went on:

'When listening to M. Daladier, he had himself felt corresponding emotions. It made his blood boil to see Germany getting away with it time after time and increasing her domination over free peoples. But such sentimental considerations were dangerous, and he must remember, as M. Daladier would also have to remember, the forces with which we were playing. Whatever the odds might be in favour of peace or war, it was not money but men with which we were gambling, and he could not lightly enter into a conflict which might mean such frightful results for innumerable families, men, women and children, of our own race. We must therefore consider with the greatest care whether, if the attitude he had just outlined towards Germany were adopted, we—and in this connection he was thinking of His Majesty's Government and the French Government, since we could not count on any outside support—were sufficiently powerful to make victory certain. Frankly, he did not think we were. He fully agreed with the remarks which M. Daladier had made yesterday on the power of the defensive, and he thought that a time would come when a gamble on the issue of peace or war might be contemplated with less anxiety than at present. At this moment he was certain public opinion in Great Britain would not allow His Majesty's Government to take such a risk, and it was no use for this Government, or indeed for any other Government, to go beyond its public opinion with the possible effect of bringing destruction to brave people. Great though his sympathy was for the views expressed by M. Daladier, his cool judgment told him that the moment had not come when it was safe to adopt such an attitude.'

Finally, although he certainly did not exclude the possibility that we might be compelled to go to war at some time, Mr. Chamberlain made it clear that only 'dire necessity' would ever persuade him to wage a preventive war.

Towards the end of the two days' discussions Lord Halifax summed up the British point of view. The difference in principle between the two Governments, he argued, was that while the French saw the military as dependent upon the political situation, on the British side it was the other way round. It appeared that, by this, he meant not that the use of force should be seen as the outcome of an otherwise insoluble political problem, but that it would not be safe to rely on the use of force anyway and would be necessary to rely on political methods alone. In this he might, perhaps, have recalled with profit the warning given by Mr. Eden more than once—that there were limits to a viable diplomacy unless backed by strength of other kinds. And Lord Halifax made his last comment on this

subject by repeating what Mr. Chamberlain had already said—that if Dr. Benes offered terms to Germany considered reasonable by H.M. Government, and if those terms were refused by Germany and the refusal followed by a German attack on Czechoslovakia, then H.M. Government would still be unable to accept the obligation to defend Czechoslovakia against the results of German aggression.⁽⁷⁶⁾

Nothing that happened during the summer sufficed to change these views. From the beginning of the Sudeten crisis until the Munich talks and agreement of 1938 the British Chiefs of Staff were convinced—and Ministers accepted and acted upon that conviction—that nothing Britain and France could do at that time could prevent a German attack on Czechoslovakia or help to defeat that attack directly. If the latter country did find herself at war with Germany she would be defeated and could be liberated and restored only as the result of a long war. This view was explained by the Chiefs of Staff in great detail both in March 1938,⁽⁷⁷⁾ and once again in a C.O.S. paper prepared during the September crisis and passed on to the Ministers in the first week of October.⁽⁷⁸⁾ And at no point did either the Chiefs of Staff or Ministers seem concerned with a problem much discussed later, i.e. whether it was better to fight Germany in 1938 rather than later on in order to make full use of an undefeated Czech army and air force.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Whatever the private doubts of individuals, official policy, as outlined by Chamberlain to Daladier at the end of April and as set out from the military point of view by the Chiefs of Staff in late March, remained unaltered. It was made clear that Britain could be involved in a war because of events in central Europe either because of a direct attack by Germany on France or by France herself going to the help of an invaded Czechoslovakia with France herself suffering heavily and thus leading to a threat to the Channel ports.⁽⁸⁰⁾ But Britain would not take the military initiative, any more than she did in the Rhineland crisis of 1936, and it was almost certainly such an initiative that Chamberlain had in mind when he spoke of a 'preventive war'.* The immediate reason for this, and one repeated time and time again in the domestic debate and in discussions with the French Government, was the still uncompleted state of Britain's rearmament programme and the assumption that the French were no better off.

The Chiefs of Staff argued throughout this time that, if war came, then France and Britain would be inferior in strength to Germany both on land and in the air and that even the inclusion of Czechoslovakia on the Allied side would only just provide a balance.⁽⁸¹⁾ As a result, they further argued, 'We can do nothing to prevent the dog getting the bone, and we have no means of making him

* See above, p. 645.

give it up, except by killing him by a slow process of attrition and starvation'.⁽⁸²⁾

It should not be thought, however, that the Chiefs of Staff were arguing, even if only by implication, that intervention by Britain in the affairs of eastern Europe, for specific purposes and in specific places, would be possible once her rearmament programme was completed. Munich was not a conscious attempt to gain time in that sense, even though time was, in fact, gained. There was an established habit of thinking, shared by the Chiefs of Staff, that central and eastern Europe were not directly Britain's concern. This had become evident in 1934 in discussions about an Eastern Pact on lines similar to Locarno. In early 1937 the Chiefs of Staff again made it clear that they were afraid Britain could be drawn into a war against her own wishes 'on account of our being linked with France, a country who was largely bound by pacts with other countries—in east and south-east Europe'.⁽⁸³⁾ They further argued, at about the same time, that only a threat from Germany to dominate western Europe would, from the military point of view, 'justify us in taking part in a European war at the present time arising out of events in eastern Europe'.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The Chiefs of Staff, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, were as suspicious as ever of 'complications' in the spring of 1938 and against more Staff talks with the French for that, among other reasons.

Nor was this sense of detachment from events on the far side of Germany confined to the military. Indeed, there is evidence that there were, among members of the Government and their advisers, those who looked with favour rather than otherwise on Germany's Sudetenland claims. Prominent among these was the Prime Minister. Chamberlain accepted, without reservation, the views of the Chiefs of Staff that effective military help to Czechoslovakia was impossible short of a long war of attrition and made it clear as early as March 1938, that he had 'abandoned any idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia or to France in connection with her obligations to that country',⁽⁸⁵⁾ an assertion of freedom to choose which was repeated by the Foreign Office a little later in that year.⁽⁸⁶⁾ But Chamberlain went further than that. So far as eastern Europe was concerned, at least until early 1939, his outbursts against Hitler were not directed at what Hitler wanted but against the methods he used to satisfy those wants. As early as November 1937 Chamberlain wrote:

'I don't see why we shouldn't say to Germany give us satisfactory assurances that you won't use force to deal with the Austrians and Czecho-Slovakians and we'll give you similar assurances that we won't use force to prevent the changes you want if you can get them by peaceful means . . . for the Germans' he added,

'want much the same things for the Sudetendeutsche as we did for the Uitlanders in the Transvaal.'⁽⁸⁷⁾

He wrote again in much the same sense in March 1938,⁽⁸⁸⁾ and on 1st May of that year commented:

'... as in accordance with our arrangements with the French it is left to us alone to ask the Germans what they want in Czechoslovakia. I am not without hope that we may get through without a fresh demonstration of force.'⁽⁸⁹⁾

And within a few days of his two visits to Germany Chamberlain summed up his position, and that of a large majority both of Ministers^{(90)*} and professional advisers when he wrote:⁽⁹¹⁾

'I fully realise that if eventually things go wrong and the aggression takes place there will be many, including Winston, who will say that the British Government must bear the responsibility and that if only they had had the courage to tell Hitler now that if he used force we should at once declare war that would have stopped him. By that time it will be impossible to prove the contrary, but I am satisfied that we should be wrong to allow the most vital decision that any country could take, the decision as to peace or war, to pass out of our own hands into those of the ruler of another country and a lunatic at that.'

In other words, the evidence suggests that, even had Britain's rearmament programme been much more advanced than it actually was in 1938, the British Government would still not have advised Benes differently or chosen to go to war had Benes compromised and yet been attacked. The change of mind which led, a year later, to a totally different policy towards Poland had yet to happen. As a result, there was no discussion of a possible two-front strategy during the Anglo-French Staff talks which took place in the summer of 1938. The approaching Munich crisis did not lead to any change in strategic outlook and plans. That change did not occur until after Munich, and was much more directly related to the crisis of March 1939 than to that of September 1938.

* Duff Cooper was the only Minister who actually resigned over this issue, and Chamberlain claimed that 'only Mr. Stanley and Mr. Crookshank really gave me trouble.'⁽⁹⁰⁾

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- (38) i.e. as in Cmd. 5149, and Cmd. 5134 623
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PART IV
CHAPTER XVII
ANGLO-FRENCH STAFF TALKS,
1939

1. *Pressure for New Talks: Winter, 1938-39*

WITHIN A few weeks of the Munich crisis the issue of Staff talks was once more brought to the attention of Ministers. On 18th November 1938 a letter was sent from the Foreign Office to the Secretary of the C.I.D. about certain matters which, it was thought, the French would want to discuss during the proposed visit to Paris of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary a little later that month. The purpose of the visit was, in fact, to discuss Franco-British co-operation in the organisation of national defence.^{(1)*} The French, it seemed, were particularly anxious to clear up several points. They had jumped to the conclusion that recently announced policy concerning the Royal Air Force meant a substantial increase in fighter strength for home defence and a resultant weakening of emphasis on bombers for offensive operations.[†] They also appeared likely to want to concentrate all their own naval forces in the Mediterranean, on the ground that the Royal Navy should be able to deal with the situation in Home Waters and in the Atlantic.

The Chiefs of Staff were unforthcoming in their comments on the points raised in the Foreign Office letter. On naval dispositions they strongly urged that, even if Germany and Italy were to combine against France and Britain, then France should leave her two battle-cruisers of the 'Dunkerque' class to operate in Atlantic waters, whether off Brest or Gibraltar or still further south. In air matters they denied that the recent fighter programmes implied a weakening of intention to bomb the enemy; the counter-offensive remained an essential component of air defence. On the other hand, they admitted that the French would probably like us to concentrate mainly on the provision of a large air striking force while they, in turn, and 'since their contribution on land would be so greatly superior to our own, would concentrate on the provision of fighter aircraft to protect their

* See above, p. 492.

† For these R.A.F. details see above, pp. 586-89.

army in the field'. This, which within a strategic doctrine of 'limited liability' would seem to have been a reasonable basis of specialisation, was firmly dismissed by the Chiefs of Staff as 'a policy to which we could not subscribe'. Finally, they were adamant that, even though Germany could now greatly increase the strength of her attack on France because of her strategic gains from Austria and Czechoslovakia, nonetheless we could do nothing more than fulfil our existing offer to send, initially, two divisions to help the French soon after the outbreak of war; and even these divisions would be deficient in many items of modern equipment, for example in tanks. The Chiefs of Staff also advised against carrying Staff talks any further than the comparatively low-level discussions of the previous summer, unless it was now thought necessary to plan for a hostile Italy and, in that case, only naval talks at a higher level would be necessary.⁽²⁾

The talks between Ministers took place in Paris on 24th November, and had no political consequences of any immediate importance.^{(3)*} M. Daladier stated that he was ready to repeat the undertaking given in December 1936, that if Britain should be the victim of unprovoked aggression then France would bind herself to come to her assistance. But Mr. Chamberlain was much less forthcoming. And although he agreed in principle to new Staff talks, no talks in fact took place as a result of this particular meeting. There was, as yet, still no sense of urgency in this matter in London.

Towards the end of January 1939, however, a sense of urgency did appear. The Foreign Office had received information of what appeared to be German preparations for an invasion of Holland. At their meeting on 25th January, therefore, the Cabinet instructed the F.P.C. to consider what should be the response of H.M. Government to a German invasion of Holland and, further, whether the scope of Staff talks with the French and Belgian Governments should be extended and similar talks with the Dutch begun.^{(4)†}

The F.P.C. naturally took the advice of the Chiefs of Staff. The latter, and the F.P.C. with the Prime Minister as chairman, agreed that there was no hope of preventing Holland from being overrun in the event of a German attack upon her and that the restoration of Dutch territory to independence would depend on the later course of the war. Nevertheless they were clear that if Germany invaded Holland and Holland resisted, then for both political and military reasons H.M. Government would have to regard Germany's action as a *casus belli*.⁽⁵⁾

Several things followed from this. It was necessary to make a

* See also above, pp. 492-94.

† See above, pp. 498-500.

diplomatic approach to the French Government explaining the views of H.M. Government in this matter and seeking French approval and support. A simultaneous approach in the same sense should be made to Belgium. Should these diplomatic approaches prove successful, then the next step would be to engage in further Staff talks to formulate joint plans to meet the contingency of a German invasion of Holland. These talks, if undertaken, should, in the view of the F.P.C., go well beyond anything done so far. It was necessary to deal with joint plans not only for military operations but also for supplies. Talks had hitherto been proceeding on a hypothetical and non-committal basis. But, the Committee reported, the new talks it was now recommending 'will in fact constitute a far more binding obligation than has hitherto been contemplated; since the countries with whom these joint plans are concerted will inevitably place reliance upon our co-operation and will make their own dispositions and arrangements accordingly'.⁽⁶⁾ Equally important, planning should now take place on the basis of war against Germany and Italy in combination, extended to include all likely areas of operations, especially the Mediterranean and Middle East. It was assumed, however, that even if we found ourselves at war with Germany and Italy in the near future then Japan would stay neutral, at any rate at the outset, because of her own problems in the Far East. And finally, the F.P.C. advised that it would now be necessary to establish periodic liaison of a general character with the French and Belgian Staffs, a development which H.M. Government had always previously resisted.

The full Cabinet considered this report at a long meeting on 1st February 1939. Since the report had, in any case, appeared over the signature of the Prime Minister it was not to be expected that there would be any serious opposition. Indeed, it was explicitly admitted in discussion that, although the proposals in the report represented such a big step forward that they were almost tantamount to an alliance, nonetheless the step must be taken. And the main recommendations outlined above were adopted. The only note of hesitation reminiscent of so much that had been said on earlier and similar occasions, came when the Foreign Secretary said he thought it was necessary that Staff talks should deal not only with the possibility of a German invasion of Holland but with the general question of war in the West. The Prime Minister countered this by arguing that it was undesirable to go further in this matter than we had already gone. And he quoted his own words to the Foreign Press Association when he said that 'our relations with France are so close as to pass beyond mere legal obligations since they are founded on identity of interests'. He further claimed that this approach was valuable since, if war broke out between Italy and France, it might well be in

the French interest that we should keep out of the war in order to avoid bringing Germany in on Italy's side.⁽⁷⁾ Since we were ourselves, during the ensuing months, to be engaged in plans with the French for war against Italy and Germany, and yet at the same time—both before and after the outbreak of hostilities—doing our best to keep Italy out of the war, it is difficult to understand why the Foreign Secretary's suggestion should have been taken to deny flexibility and power to choose. The Prime Minister's remarks on this point seem to suggest a lingering suspicion of France despite the increasing sense of crisis.

The Chiefs of Staff were told of the Cabinet's decisions and were asked to survey and report on the whole position forthwith so that Staff talks with the French, on the wider basis now proposed, could be undertaken at an early date. The Chiefs of Staff admitted that there was something to be said for conducting the talks at a very high level, for example between the Chiefs of Staff of the two countries. On the other hand, such talks would attract publicity and suggest a crisis, and might perhaps provoke Hitler into some precipitate action. 'Moreover', they said, as on several occasions before, 'we cannot ignore the probability that the French might seize the opportunity to make political capital out of important Staff meetings.' And they were also of the opinion that, in existing circumstances, it was to our advantage to play for time until our own rearmament was further forward, always provided this did not delay planning that was currently necessary. They therefore recommended that the talks should be conducted at a level which could reasonably be regarded as a continuation of the contacts established in 1936 and continued since, while still reflecting the greater urgency of the new situation. In practical terms this was taken to mean talks at the Joint Planning Sub-Committee level. The talks should be carried out in three stages—a discussion of overall strategy for a war against Germany and Italy, discussion of broad outlines for individual theatres, and formulation of detailed joint plans. Any talks with the Belgians and Dutch should be postponed to a later stage, in order not to complicate talks in the immediate future.⁽⁸⁾

After a brief discussion the Cabinet accepted these recommendations without any serious amendment, on 8th February.⁽⁹⁾ The Staff talks that followed were conducted in three stages. The first began on 29th March and ended on 4th April, and covered the formulation of a common policy for the overall conduct of the war. The second stage began on 24th April and ended on 3rd May, and dealt with the formulation of joint plans for particular theatres in the light of Ministerial comment on the proposals drawn up during the first stage. The third stage, which went on at intervals throughout the summer of 1939, was a stage for clearing up details. These talks,

which took place in London, were then followed by a series of conferences between local commanders, British and French, in the principal areas of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, involving a conference at Rabat from 4th-6th May, one at Aden from 30th May-3rd June, and a third at Jerusalem on 2nd June. And, while all this was going on, the urgency of the talks, and hence the detail of them also, was affected by the rapidly worsening international situation. Only under the impact of that deterioration did the note of complacency, still evident in early February, finally disappear.⁽¹⁰⁾

2. *The Chiefs of Staff European Appreciation for 1939-40*

Before the Anglo-French talks opened the Chiefs of Staff had written their 'European Appreciation, 1939-40', which, although almost immediately out-dated in some respects, nevertheless remained fundamentally valid in its general principles during these talks and until the outbreak of war. As such it must be treated here at some length.^{(11)*}

The Appreciation was cast as for April 1939, and dealt with an Anglo-French war against Germany and Italy with the possible intervention of Japan. Politically it assumed that Britain and France would have the support of Australia and New Zealand, though the initial attitude of Canada, and more particularly South Africa and Eire, would depend upon the cause for which we were fighting. The U.S.A. would be friendly but unlikely to intervene. Portugal would fulfil her treaty obligations, and so would Egypt and Iraq if they were satisfied that we could defend them and if in agreement with our policy in Palestine. It was very important that Spain should be neutral, but possible that she would, nonetheless, give facilities to the Axis. The smaller western European states liable to attack by Germany would probably try to defend themselves if the need arose, but would otherwise remain neutral. The prospect of a general conflagration arising from a German adventure in eastern Europe was considered unlikely in the pre-Prague days in which the Appreciation was written; and in the Western war with which it was therefore primarily concerned nothing was expected from the U.S.S.R. except a restraining influence on Japan. The potential of the Soviet Union was in fact almost entirely overlooked. The Foreign Office thought her 'in no condition to wage offensive war effectively' and likely to go to almost any lengths, short of sub-

* The new Appreciation was shortened for the purposes of the subsequent Anglo-French Staff talks.⁽¹²⁾ For reasons of secrecy it was not passed to the French intact but as several smaller papers.⁽¹³⁾

mitting to an invasion of her own territories, to avoid hostilities; and the Chiefs of Staff accepted this estimate. Nor did the Chiefs of Staff expect any aid from Poland, or anything, except at best benevolent neutrality, from the smaller eastern countries apart from Turkey; and—perhaps optimistically—they thought Turkey might come in on our side.^{(14)*}

The economic assumptions governing the Appreciation—put forward with the warning they were only tentative—did not make Germany's position seem quite as difficult as had been alleged by the Foreign Office during the recent Ministerial discussions. Her industrial strength would be adequate to equip and maintain in war all the armed forces she planned to use provided the raw materials were available. And for these, although the four year plan was reducing her dependence on imports, she still had to rely on outside sources of supply since her stocks were not what they should be before starting a war against a strong naval power. Nevertheless, because in the early weeks of war it would be difficult for the Western Allies to interfere except at sea, there was no reason to suppose Germany could not get from countries accessible to her by land enough raw materials to maintain industrial resistance for a year, subject always to the problems of congested communications and to the willingness of the countries concerned to supply her. Her principal shortages would be manganese, of which she could only get enough if political and transportation difficulties with Russia could be overcome; non-ferrous metals, for which Yugoslavia was a valuable potential source; petroleum, for which Roumania was the sole source; and above all iron ore from Sweden, which Germany largely obtained through Rotterdam. Another vulnerable point in Germany's economic system was the concentration of the bulk of her heavy industry in the Ruhr and within reach of Allied bombers. The Chiefs of Staff attached such importance to this area that they felt its loss or the severe curtailment of its activities 'could not fail eventually to prove decisive in a war of national effort'.

Italy was weak in manufacturing capacity and would be in need of most industrial raw materials. So long as she could maintain sea-borne trade in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea she could probably get enough of these materials to wage a naval and air war at maximum intensity for a considerable period, but could not simultaneously carry out large-scale operations on land. Moreover, as her principal markets would be the same as Germany's, there

* During the Staff talks the French showed a slightly higher opinion than we did of Russia's potential. While thinking that poor organisation and command and the lack of communications made it unlikely that the Russians would undertake offensive operations outside their own country, nevertheless the French did not believe them incapable of doing so if actually faced with the necessity.⁽¹⁵⁾

would inevitably be a clash between them for the limited supplies available. And, as with Germany, most of Italy's industrial capacity was concentrated in one area, in her case the triangle Milan-Turin-Genoa, the loss or curtailment of activity in which would be similarly decisive.

In a war involving Japan as well these economic assumptions would not be greatly altered even though Germany and Italy might have things much their own way in the eastern Mediterranean: deficiencies in raw materials would remain which would, sooner or later, limit the duration of the resistance of all of them. Japan herself was short of manufacturing capacity and raw materials though her existing stocks would be enough for at least six months of war. For their replenishment she was of course dependent on vulnerable sea-routes, and would be further hampered by the severe blow the loss of British and French export markets would be to her already strained finances and by the discrimination against her which might be expected from the U.S.A. in the operation of the Neutrality Act. Britain and France would have stronger economic resources than any of their three potential enemies. Subject to naval and air attacks and the availability of shipping the Allies should be able to keep up their supplies of raw materials. But the maintenance of a war effort would depend upon industrial capacity and upon imports of finished armaments: in both respects much remained to be done.^{(16)*}

From a comparison of forces it was clear that only at sea would we be stronger than our enemies and, even so, the margin in capital ships would barely suffice to implement our strategy in a world war. Even if at war only with Germany and Italy we would be hard pressed by our deficiencies in destroyers, escort vessels and mine-sweepers to deal with enemy submarines if the latter engaged in unrestricted war, and particularly if they were using Spanish harbours. If for any reason Germany denounced the Anglo-German Naval

* A later paper prepared for the Staff talks⁽¹⁷⁾ brought the economic situation up to date: and the effects of the Prague coup were covered in much greater detail in a report by the Department of Overseas Trade⁽¹⁸⁾: together these papers showed the principal effect of the two Axis coups of the spring of 1939 to be the great improvement brought about in the communications of Germany and Italy with the countries upon which they depended for raw materials. Otherwise they had not gained much. Germany, it is true, had absorbed the reserves and the important war industries of Bohemia and Moravia, which might well enable the maintenance of forces otherwise unable to take the field. But demand for a steady supply of raw materials remained as pressing as ever, and, apart from improved communications, the problems involved in acquiring such a supply were unchanged. Italy's annexation of Albania made no practical difference economically since for some time past she had been in full possession of Albanian resources. On the Allied side the new policy arising from the two coups apparently meant the acceptance of economic liabilities (a point which had not been considered in the Ministerial discussions to evolve that policy). Poland, Turkey and Greece were all dependent upon the external supply of armaments which would mainly have to reach them from the West by sea, always assuming we could furnish their needs; for as a source of supply to these countries the U.S.S.R. was a very uncertain quantity.

Treaty it would not be possible with our current armour and armament production to ensure that we kept pace with her and Japan in warship construction. On land, the Anglo-French total of divisions would not in the initial stages equal Germany's. But the Chiefs of Staff attached importance to the strong system of fortifications on the French eastern frontier, and felt that because of this a comparison of numbers might be misleading. In the air, the Allies were very greatly inferior both in air striking power, judged on the basis of first-line strength, and in reserves. And although Britain's position was rapidly improving, in France there was little prospect of a satisfactory level of output in less than two years.⁽¹⁹⁾

Against this background the Chiefs of Staff saw the Allies' broad strategic policy in a war with Germany and Italy as largely defensive in the opening phase; the economic indications were that the two latter would aim at a rapid victory within a few months and we must therefore be prepared to face a major offensive against either ourselves or France. It was essential to ensure that the strength of our own forces and our organisation for civilian defence gave adequate protection for the home base. It was also essential to make secure our territories overseas, and the escort of the necessary reinforcements to those areas would at first divert the Navy from other tasks. In these circumstances the Chiefs of Staff did indeed say that no opportunity should be lost to take such offensive action as might be possible—with Italy probably an easier target than Germany—but it is clear that, except at sea, nothing decisive was expected and the only offensive we were likely to take in the early stages was the dissemination of propaganda and some measures of economic warfare. Even in the second phase there could be little real offensive action. Political and economic warfare would continue while we were building up our military strength and until we could go over to the offensive third stage. The Chiefs of Staff did not even speculate about when this last would happen, but felt that once we had developed the full fighting strength of the Empire we could face the outcome of the war with confidence and, by command of the sea, could choose where we would strike. There were signs that when we did eventually pass to a major offensive strategy it might be advantageous first to deal decisively with Italy. But clearly the Chiefs of Staff could not at this point be specific about an inevitably distant future. They did, however, repeat their so-often-expressed warning about a war in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Far East all at once. Neither our present nor even our projected strength was designed to meet such a disaster with France as our only major ally, and the outcome would of necessity depend upon our ability to hold on to our key positions while waiting for the assistance of other Powers, in particular the U.S.A.⁽²⁰⁾

The bulk of the Appreciation dealt with the execution of the first phase of this strategy. In examining the various contingencies the Chiefs of Staff took the 'worst case' applicable to each but pointed out that these could not occur simultaneously: for example, if the German attack was concentrated on France, pressure on the United Kingdom would not be so severe and our air forces could thus help our ally to a greater extent. Since it was their view that we would be regarded by Germany as her most formidable enemy then it followed that she would gain much by acting effectively against the British Isles before the resources of the Empire had been developed. But the Chiefs of Staff saw no reason to alter the long-held theory that our command of the Channel and the North Sea ruled out any question of an actual invasion. The land forces retained at home therefore need only be enough to man the air defences and deal with possible raids; and to deal with the latter our coast defence would be reasonably adequate as far as close defence and seaward defences were concerned, though less so in the case of counter-bombardment or anti-motor-torpedo-boat defences.

Of the possible forms of main attack open to Germany the Chiefs of Staff thought the most likely to be against our supply and communications system by submarine and from the air, but did not rule out either a concentrated attack on our naval forces to reduce their superiority and relieve the economic stranglehold, or sustained air attacks on the R.A.F., the civil population and on our war industries. Against air attack on the British Isles we had an A.R.P. organisation which was gradually making up deficiencies; the same could hardly be said for anti-aircraft defence, since at present we had only about two-thirds of the number of guns and half the number of lights provided for in an approved programme that was itself inadequate. To protect our sea-borne trade our basic policy was so to place the Main Fleet that it could give cover to shipping from naval attack, under which cover cruisers and small craft could act directly against units or detachments of the enemy. A balance had therefore to be struck between the needs of the Main Fleet and those of the smaller forces, a balance made all the more difficult to achieve because of several major deficiencies. The most serious shortages were in cruisers, small escort vessels of all types, anti-submarine and reconnaissance aircraft and mine-sweepers.* Nevertheless, and although they admitted that 'the general position with regard to the protection of sea-borne trade will not be satisfactory', the Chiefs of Staff did not seem to be unduly alarmed. Germany would not, initially, have as many submarines as she had at the peak period of the First World War, and the effect of her air attacks on the Royal Navy was still

* For fuller details see above, Chapter XI, Section 3.

conjectural. In all, it was considered that Germany's scale of naval attack would diminish as the war went on and would, in the long run, be brought to a standstill.

The R.A.F., in addition to its other duties, would defend shipping in port and in narrow waters, but our fighter strength would inevitably decline in the face of continued attack. The Chiefs of Staff were therefore a little cautious about the use of the air striking force because they did not know how much help the close air defences would need. This force was anyway not strong enough for us to count on it making Germany modify her offensive and would therefore probably at first be used to help counter that offensive until the latter was brought to manageable proportions. Our air striking force could be more widely used if, in the face of a German air attack regardless of any humanitarian considerations, we thought it politically desirable to retaliate. But the Chiefs of Staff assumed it to be no part of our policy to initiate such attacks.^{(21)*}

In their examination of a western attack concentrated against France the Chiefs of Staff were even more hampered by lack of detailed knowledge of French plans. Much was therefore left over until we found out more, and the Appreciation was for the most part confined to general principles on which no serious dispute was likely. The chief direct threat to Metropolitan France would, of course, be German: for topographical reasons Italy would be unlikely to invade French territory in Europe and might be reluctant, for fear of retaliation, to initiate air attack. Germany, subject to what was happening in eastern Europe, would be able to attack France with about 60 divisions and a considerable proportion of her air force. And, since the whole of her common frontier with France was covered either by the permanent fortifications of the Maginot Line or by natural obstacles strengthened by field defences, she might well prefer to attack either through Switzerland or, more likely, through the Low Countries. The first task of the Allies must obviously be to check the German advance, and it is clear the Chiefs of Staff were not initially expecting anything in the nature of a counter-offensive. The Belgian Army of 3 mobile and 18 infantry divisions could be expected to fight stoutly, but the Dutch would probably not be able to offer much resistance. Nor were we ourselves in a position to give to the French much direct support. Though we could place a contingent of our air striking force at their disposal, this alone could not hope to stop the German advance. To do this effectively strong land forces would have to be deployed, and at present our best contribution to these could only be pitifully small.

Here also, as the Chiefs of Staff were well aware, lay the basic

* For more detail on British bombing policy see above, Chapter XV, Section 5.

problem of Anglo-French strategy. They concluded this particular section of their paper as follows:

'The weight of attack which Germany could bring to bear on France would have an important bearing on the question of our supporting France on land.

Only two divisions and ancillary troops, the "Intermediate Contingent", would initially be available for despatch overseas in April 1939. This force would still be inadequately equipped and unsupported by reserves . . . and its immediate tactical value must be limited.

Nevertheless the moral aspect of the early assistance of the British Empire on land would be out of proportion to the size of the force despatched, and is a matter upon which the French themselves lay great stress. France faced with Germany and Italy, whose combined populations total 125 millions, might well give up the unequal struggle unless supported with the assurance that we should assist them to our utmost. If France were forced "to her knees" the further prosecution of the war would be compromised. In establishing the rôle which the Army was designed to fulfil, the Cabinet in 1937 placed first the defence of the United Kingdom and last co-operation in the defence of the territories of our allies. It is, however, difficult to say how the security of the United Kingdom could be maintained if France were forced to capitulate and therefore the defence of the former may have to include a share in the land defence of French territory.

The final decision, of course, could only be taken by His Majesty's Government in the light of the circumstances existing at the time, and having regard to the possible requirements for British troops in other theatres.'⁽²²⁾

It is certainly true that it was the Cabinet which decided on the rôle of the Army in late 1937. On the other hand it is equally true that neither the Chiefs of Staff together, nor the Army Staff through Mr. Hore-Belisha, raised any serious objection to the decision; and this despite the fact that, since the first D.R.C. Report of November 1933, the Chiefs of Staff had on several occasions warned the Government that the security of France should be regarded as part and parcel of the security of the United Kingdom. Moreover, the seriousness of the warning now given in mid-February 1939 contrasts oddly with the still reluctant attitude of the Chiefs of Staff towards Staff talks with the French,* and that despite the admission that the outline of an Allied strategy could not be satisfactorily drawn up without more knowledge of French plans and forces than we possessed so far.

* See above, p. 656.

The greatest threat from Italy would come in the Mediterranean and Africa where, because of Anglo-French preoccupation with Germany, Italy might see an opportunity to expand her empire. She would, however, be hampered by naval inferiority; and her action at sea would probably be more or less confined to protecting communications and reducing Allied superiority, not by risking her Main Fleet but by the use of submarines and cruisers and by air action. Nevertheless, though limited by this inferiority, Italian attacks on Tunisia and more especially on Egypt must be expected. Egypt would be the more probable target since Italy's retention of her East African Empire would depend upon control of the Suez Canal: and for such an attack it was certain she could maintain in the desert 2 motorised divisions and, in all probability, even allowing for possible French air attack from Bizerta, could heavily outnumber the air forces which could be assembled against her. Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, either a *coup-de-main* or a large sea-borne expedition against Malta must be expected, but Gibraltar would be secure as long as Spain remained neutral. And, while we retained command of the eastern Mediterranean, nothing more than raids on Palestine, Syria and Cyprus were likely. East Africa would be only a secondary theatre and Italian operations there probably designed to assist those in the Mediterranean. An offensive against Allied shipping in the Red Sea, diverted from the Mediterranean via the Cape so as to prevent it reaching Suez, might therefore be Italy's most profitable course. But her naval forces in the area were only light and an air attack, which might be more dangerous, depended upon the internal situation in Ethiopia and upon the amount of stocks Italy had been able to accumulate locally in peace-time. The same limitations would apply to attacks on Aden, necessary to us as a naval base. Of the remaining British territory in East Africa the Sudan would be the most likely target in creating a diversion from Egypt, but action would probably be confined to air attacks and raids by mobile columns. Elsewhere operations would be of little strategic value and, if undertaken, would be mainly for prestige: the two Somalilands were therefore the likeliest objectives.

The power of Britain and France to bring immediate pressure to bear against Italy would depend upon the extent of their control of her sea communications to interrupt her trade and isolate her overseas territories. This would entail offensive naval action from the outset wherever possible, and would necessitate the closest co-operation between the two Allied fleets. Dispositions should provide for British control of the eastern Mediterranean and French of the western, with British anti-submarine forces at Gibraltar, and for light Allied forces at Malta and Bizerta. Initially the French might

be on the defensive in the west since they would be preoccupied with their own supply lines. The central area would be especially dependent upon joint Allied action since it was possible that Malta would be denied to the Royal Navy by the threat from the air. But even though it was in this part of the Mediterranean that the risks would be greatest, the Chiefs of Staff were not prepared to plan defensively there. Both in the central, and more especially in the eastern areas, the use of Greek harbours would be a great boon in the interception of Italy's Black Sea trade. Without them the Fleet at Alexandria—in spite of only limited facilities there—could cut Italian communications with East Africa but could not ensure so effective a control of trade. If Turkey was our ally, the improvement could not be over-emphasised. The Black Sea trade could be stopped, we would have new air and naval facilities, and Italy's Dodecanese possessions would become, for her, defence liabilities instead of vantage points for attack.

To meet Italian offensives against Allied African territories things were not so favourable. The French would probably be able to repel an onslaught on Tunisia and even advance on Libya to relieve pressure on Egypt. But that would not in itself be enough to defend a country first in strategic importance in the Mediterranean area. Due to the purely fortuitous fact that the Palestine garrison was far above normal strength, there were sufficient British troops in the Middle East to meet an initial Italian attack on Egypt and also to leave enough in Palestine in case the situation there became worse. But reinforcements for Egypt, and indeed for all parts of the Middle East, would be needed, and with the Mediterranean closed would take at least 70 days to reach their destination via the Cape; nor was it at all desirable for such reinforcements to be moved after an emergency had arisen for the obvious reasons of risking even a proportion of our attenuated forces and of the need to reduce demands on the Navy for escort duties. In the air no amount of reinforcement could make us other than greatly inferior to Italy, and our anti-aircraft defence was equally weak. In East Africa our primary object must be to secure our lines of communication with Egypt and this must therefore be the first task of such naval and air forces as we had there. For the rest, the Chiefs of Staff were thinking entirely in terms of defence. In the Sudan the garrison could not defend any considerable length of frontier but should be able to resist, and indeed defeat, the raiding columns that were the most likely form of attack. Elsewhere in East Africa little more than delaying action was possible. If the worst happened and Japan entered the war and a Fleet had therefore to go to the Far East, only very reduced naval forces would remain in the Mediterranean. In consequence Italy would have command of the eastern area and the

possibility of sea-borne attack on Egypt and Palestine would have to be faced. But this prospect was not considered unduly alarming provided reinforcements had already arrived.⁽²³⁾

The Chiefs of Staff dealt only briefly with the Far East. They assumed our strategy there to be based, as hitherto, on the despatch of a Fleet to Singapore irrespective of the state of affairs at any rate in the Mediterranean. The move away from this general strategic approach was to come shortly.* Once the Fleet had arrived, our sea communications should be secure and the invasion of Australia, New Zealand and India in the highest degree unlikely, though raids there and elsewhere might still be possible. Until the arrival of the Fleet we must rely on local forces, and here the needs of Singapore were paramount. Even while an emergency was still confined to Europe the army and air reinforcement plans, which included a brigade and R.A.F. squadrons from India, must be put into effect. These should be sufficient to ensure the security of the fortress until the Fleet arrived provided it was not too long delayed; but still more air reinforcements were desirable. At Hong Kong there was no effective opposition at all to a likely heavy scale of air attack, and the decision of the previous summer to defend the island was in fact limited to denying its anchorage to the enemy.⁽²⁴⁾

As we have seen,† in February 1939, the C.I.D. referred the European Appreciation to the S.A.C. specifically directing its attention to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's proposal 'that it should suggest an order of priority for these recommendations involving expenditure outside the approved programme'.⁽²⁵⁾ In fact, the S.A.C. dealt with the Appreciation somewhat differently, and thought it right to consider first those parts of it bearing directly on matters now to be discussed with the French. As it happened, the S.A.C.'s report was not ready until after the first stage of the Anglo-French talks was concluded; but it was available in good time for the second stage which took place in London in the second half of April.⁽²⁶⁾

There were four items in the S.A.C.'s report which were of major strategic importance. First, they underlined the virtually insoluble problem of so distributing the Fleet as 'to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously'. They did not set out any preferred order of priority; but their remarks were such as to imply that the established order ought not necessarily to be accepted now. Second, the S.A.C. considered it 'essential to reduce the scale of [air] attack on this country', and argued that a counter-force strategy was an essential part of this approach. The difficulty here, however, was that, on the

* See above, p. 421 and ff.

† See above, p. 423.

one hand, raids even on strictly military targets could hardly avoid some loss of civilian lives while, on the other, it was accepted that Britain would not want to initiate air attacks against enemy civilian populations. Unless, therefore, we were to deny ourselves the bombing initiative and 'wait till we were bombed before employing our own bombers', we might well have to accept some risks. The S.A.C.'s recommendation was that Anglo-French plans should be based on the assumption that

'We shall not initiate air action against any but purely "military objectives" in the narrowest sense of the term—i.e. navy, army and air forces and establishments; and the question whether we are the first to bomb at all must be a matter for decision by the respective Governments at the time.'

Third, S.A.C. thought that the Chiefs of Staff Appreciation was 'too indefinite' about a commitment to support the French with our land forces. They now recommended that—

'... in the event of a German land attack on France or Belgium, the despatch of the regular contingents of the Field Force, after certain specified dates after we had entered a war in alliance with the French, should be accepted as a primary commitment.'

Finally, the S.A.C. strongly endorsed the Chiefs of Staff view that, in the kind of war now being planned for, the initial Allied offensive should be designed to knock out Italy as the weaker Axis partner.

All four of these propositions were henceforward accepted as part of the British approach to Allied negotiations.

3. *Anglo-French Staff Talks*

(a) *Plans for the Main Theatres*

The Anglo-French Staff talks, as has already been noted, took place in stages. The first from 29th March to 4th April established a common strategic policy for the conduct of the war. The second—held, like the first, in London—from 24th April to 3rd May made plans in greater operational detail on the lines of this policy. These two stages—the most important for our purposes—then received the formal approval of the C.I.D. on 22nd June. Meanwhile they had been followed by local conferences between Service Commanders in the principal theatres of war at which the general decisions reached in the first two stages were worked out at theatre level.

Although the Staff talks were nominally concerned with the whole

of the changed international situation after Prague and Albania, in practice there was only the most general discussion of what we would do if Germany's main attack was eastwards, and of what, for example, we would do for and require from Turkey as an ally. These topics were pursued in much greater detail in the Staff talks with other countries which continued during the summer.* The Anglo-French talks, as far as Europe was concerned, were largely concerned with a war in the west including the Mediterranean.

The general Allied strategy for a war against Germany and Italy evolved during the first stage had a slightly less defensive flavour about it than that in the British Chiefs of Staff European Appreciation, though in its broad outline it was very similar. The two delegations came down definitely in favour of dealing decisively with Italy before Germany and, while realising that the major offensive against Italy could not come until the second phase, they did envisage for 'early in the war' some offensive operations against her colonial possessions. The final pattern was therefore: first a mainly defensive phase directed towards maintaining as far as possible the integrity of the two Empires but during which no opportunity should be lost to achieve, without undue cost, successes against Italy calculated to reduce her will to fight; then a second phase directed towards holding Germany and dealing decisively with Italy; then the final objective, the defeat of Germany.

In discussing the western European theatre of operations the delegations paid some attention to a possible Italo-German attack through Switzerland, which the French were prepared to counter, if circumstances were favourable, by entering that country to help the Federal Forces.⁽²⁷⁾ But the bulk of their discussion was about a German attack through the Low Countries. The likely scale of this attack was reduced from the sixty German divisions envisaged in the Chiefs of Staff European Appreciation to forty, and it was expected to take the form of a copy of the 1914 manoeuvre extended to the north and powerfully reinforced by armoured fighting vehicles and air forces. Covering their flank on the Belgian frontier with Luxembourg and immobilising French defences at Montmedy with as few forces as possible, the Germans would probably launch their main attack on the Brussels-Cambrai axis with the object of reaching the French position from Hirson to the North Sea. The Belgian and Dutch defences included plans for demolitions on the frontiers to delay the German advance and to cover the prepared lines of defence, which in Belgium were on the Meuse from Namur to Liege and on the Albert Canal between Liege and Antwerp, and in Holland were to the west of the Peel marshes and on the Yssel. Should these

* See below, Chapters XVIII and XIX.

positions be forced the Belgian Army would retire to the National Redoubt around Antwerp-Ghent, while the Dutch would hold the line of the Lower Rhine and a north-south line through Utrecht. To counter the attack neither French nor British troops could go to the assistance of the Dutch Army unless circumstances arose to make this practicable—for instance, if there were operations on the Eastern Front large enough to contain a considerable number of German forces. And Allied forces could enter Belgium only if invited to do so, and the invitation might come too late.

The Allies' primary objective must be the maintenance of the integrity of French territory, and they must therefore first attempt to ensure a solid defence against a German attack the basis for which would be the Maginot Line. Above all they must avoid a battle in unprepared positions and with insufficient reserves against a superior force. If they entered Belgium, they would form their front as far forward as circumstances permitted; the alternatives would be, at best, to reinforce the Belgians on their line of resistance itself, and, at worst, to hold the line of the Scheldt in order to connect the French forces at Maulde with the Belgian Redoubt. A counter-offensive as soon as possible was not altogether lost sight of in a defensive outlook, but the French felt that without full knowledge of Belgian plans Allied occupation in force of the line of the Albert Canal could not be guaranteed; it was therefore from the line of the Scheldt that the ultimate offensive must be planned.⁽²⁸⁾

In matters of air strategy the main anxiety of the Air Staff in London, before detailed discussions began in the spring of 1939, was that the French would challenge the restricted bombing policy considered by the R.A.F. to be the only acceptable policy so long as we remained greatly inferior in offensive air strength to the Germans.* This anxiety was made clear in a minute from the C.A.S. to the Secretary of State for Air as early as September 1938, in which the former wrote that, with Britain most unlikely 'to take the gloves off' in bombing policy, he was apprehensive about what the plans of the French might be and intended to ask the Chiefs of Staff to find out.⁽²⁹⁾ This anxiety remained until the 1939 Staff talks began. As a result, at the beginning of the second stages of these talks in late April, the Secretary of the United Kingdom delegation drew up a paper in which he set out the guidelines now fully accepted by the R.A.F. for bombing policy for the information and direction of the joint Staffs.⁽³⁰⁾ Apart from quoting Article 24 of the Hague Rules, this paper included an extract from a Foreign Office telegram to Tokyo of August 1938, and an extract from a statement by Mr. Chamberlain to the House of Commons on 21st June 1938. In his speech the

* See above, Chapter XV, Section 5.

Prime Minister had made it clear that his Government accepted that deliberate attacks on civilians would be a violation of international law, that only legitimate military targets identifiable from the air should be bombed and that, even in the case of such targets great care must be taken to avoid hitting neighbouring civilian areas. Mr. Chamberlain ended his remarks, however, with a qualification of some importance. While the above rules were ones which 'we can all accept and which we do accept, . . . it is obvious that when you come to put them into practice they give rise to considerable difficulties'.

Once joint discussions on this subject began, British fears proved groundless. The French, and for much of the same reasons as the British, had no intention of taking risks in this matter.⁽³¹⁾ They were even worse off than the British in equipment and also more divided among themselves on strategic and tactical doctrine.⁽³²⁾ The two delegations consequently found no difficulty in agreeing both that the selection of bombing targets was a matter of expediency and that, certainly in the early stages of war, it would be inexpedient to bomb anything but what could be defined as military targets in the 'narrowest sense of the word'. These were defined as naval, army and air forces and fixed military establishments and, even where these were concerned, it was important to confine attacks to those objectives unlikely to involve loss of civilian life. These decisions were then reaffirmed during the last days before the outbreak of war and after the signing of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact.⁽³³⁾ Instructions were issued to Commanders setting out in detail the types of objectives that could be attacked within this framework. The restrictions were on no account to be relaxed without further notice even as retaliation, but subject to this Commanders could use their discretion and frame orders according to the spirit rather than the letter.⁽³⁴⁾

Next, the French asked for a good deal of help from the R.A.F. in connection with the land battle, particularly for the purpose of slowing up a German advance through Belgium and Holland. They also wanted Britain to station more fighters in northern France in order to release their own aircraft for the southern front against Italy. In fact, British fighters were not promised over and above the four squadrons already planned, because of the needs of Home defence; and there was no specific British undertaking to operate directly against the German Army with more than a proportion of the Air Striking Force and irrespective of other contingencies. The British view was that they themselves had to face the possibility that Germany, simultaneously with a land offensive against France, might be attacking Britain from the air; in which case most of the bombers of the R.A.F. would inevitably be needed to reduce the scale of this latter attack. The French, at first, were unhappy with these qualifica-

tions and with a warning from the Air Ministry not to expect too much from air operations against the German advance. But this cautious approach was certainly not intended to imply that the British were unwilling to co-operate wholeheartedly, and French confidence was soon restored by an explicit agreement, when discussing the situation of Germany concentrating her attack on France, that the guiding principle for the use of all available bombers would be how best they could contribute to the battle on land.^{(35)*} Within this framework the delegations envisaged two categories of air attack against the German Army. First, against 'permanent' objectives such as, for example, defiles, field depots of fuel, ammunition and other supplies, and to a certain extent the enemy columns themselves: second, against 'fleeting' objectives disclosed by reconnaissance, which might for a moment assume critical importance and which could not be foreseen in advance. The zones of operations against the 'permanent' targets were divided on the principle that British bombers from home bases would attack at greater depth, French and British bombers based in France at lesser depth. After some controversy it was arranged that attacks on railways, to which the French, as the British saw it, attached exaggerated importance, should be secondary to these other objectives. Aerodromes were generally argued to be uneconomical targets and those of the German Air Force especially so because of their large number, their high scale of defence and the inferiority of allied striking power. Attacks against them would therefore take place only in cases of absolute military necessity when it was vitally important to hinder the enemy bomber force at their bases. In such an event the zones of operation would logically be for the R.A.F. to operate in the north, the French Air Force in the south. Bombing of industrial targets in Germany would also be directed by a common policy, objectives as far as possible being allotted to each Air Force on the basis of proximity.⁽³⁷⁾

One further matter should be included here, not because it concerned the Air Staff talks exclusively, but because it could have had an important effect on Allied air defence had France not been defeated in 1940. As we have seen, the British at first approached Staff talks with the French in 1939 with some of the reserve which had characterised their attitude in 1936 and again in 1938. Not surprisingly, this reserve was perhaps most noticeable in relation to those items of equipment and their use which were highly classified.

* This guiding principle itself represented a considerable advance. Only a year before, the C.O.S. had been insistent that the whole effort of the Air Striking Force must for some time to come be confined to reducing the scale of attack at home and against Egypt. There would be no margin of air power to enable us also to assist France 'except insofar as any action to reduce the attack on Britain would automatically help France as well'. In any event we could not take part in any offensive operations the French might well be contemplating.⁽³⁶⁾

All that the Cabinet had agreed to when giving its sanction for Staff talks initially was

‘that the Chiefs should have authority to impart to the French such information as to our plans and resources (other than certain technical details) as is necessary to ensure co-ordination in peace and efficient co-operation in war.’⁽³⁸⁾

When the S.A.C., however, considered the scope of the forthcoming talks in the light of this directive they came to the conclusion

‘... that on balance we stand to gain more than we had to lose by taking the French completely into our confidence with regard, not only to our plans, but also in the matter of such secret equipment as R.D.F. and Asdics, on the grounds that, as the French were to be our Allies, they should be as effective as possible.’⁽³⁹⁾

Some members of the C.I.D. were not altogether happy about this proposal when it came to them. Nonetheless, and after a good deal of discussion, the Committee decided to forward the S.A.C. proposal to the Cabinet and to recommend that it be accepted, subject to the two conditions that British processes of manufacture should not be divulged to the French and that the latter, if they adopted any of this secret equipment, should agree to its being manufactured in Britain.⁽⁴⁰⁾ On 30th March 1939 the Cabinet endorsed this recommendation and its conditions.⁽⁴¹⁾

Finally, there were arrangements for naval co-operation between the British forces in the Western Approaches and the Atlantic and the powerful French force based on Brest. Zones of operations for surface vessels in the Channel were specified and, in the Mediterranean, lines of demarcation defined on the basis of French control in the west, British in the east. For the protection of Allied trade, plans were made for joint convoys where practicable. But since joint escorting forces were not thought desirable, the French agreed instead to meet and escort one out of every four convoys arriving in the Western Approaches. They undertook as well to protect British coastal trade in the Bay of Biscay and in the Mediterranean as far east as Algiers. In the Red Sea the escort of convoys would be primarily a British responsibility.⁽⁴²⁾

In the North African theatre the French at first saw no difficulty in invading Libya from Tunisia, which they intended to do immediately Italy attacked Egypt.⁽⁴³⁾ After further consideration, however, during which they showed anxiety about Spain, they

modified this intention. If Spain were indeed hostile, Gibraltar would be unusable and control of the Straits made more difficult; France would have another front from which to fear air attack and her communications with North Africa would be threatened.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In these circumstances the French gave priority over Libya to an offensive—for which they already had plans—against Spanish Morocco. Their final word, therefore, as clarified after the Rabat Conference, was to promise an offensive against Libya in Z+25 days only if they had no anxiety about their other frontier. If they did fear attack from Spanish Morocco there could be no large-scale French offensive against Libya until the former had been dealt with, but they would have enough troops still available to 'take offensive action' against Libya at an early stage if Egypt were seriously attacked: such an action could not aim at penetrating deeply into Libya but would nevertheless contain a large number of Italian forces. A large scale offensive against Libya could begin in Z+20-30 days after the Moroccan front had been brought under control.⁽⁴⁵⁾ On the complementary principle upon which Allied plans were based the British undertook, if the main theatre of operations in North Africa was to the west, to harass the Italians on the Egyptian front and thus prevent any considerable reinforcement thence towards Tunisia. But it would not be possible, initially, to penetrate much further into Libya than perhaps Bardia: after reinforcement we would hope to go further, with Tobruk a suitable first objective.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Operations of the two air forces were to be co-ordinated and it was possible that, once the Libyan front had been cleared up and if the threat from Germany permitted, the R.A.F. might operate from Tunisia to facilitate attacks on the Italian mainland and islands.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The French had given much thought to the possibility of raising the Libyan tribes in revolt, but agreed that it would be unwise to do so except in support of what were designed as decisive military operations. Preliminary plans, such as making contacts, despatching agents and collecting arms and ammunition, were possible but great circumspection must be exercised.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean the major problem was the maintenance of security. To reinforce Malta, if we had not been able to do so before the war, the French were to provide transport facilities through Algiers or Casablanca and thence to Tunisian ports.⁽⁴⁹⁾ The conference at Jerusalem discussed the establishment of frontier control in Syria and Palestine, so as to eliminate the need to lock up in either country large forces to prevent sabotage and rebellion, and the security of the Baghdad-Haifa reinforcement route and the oil pipe-line from Iraq. Diplomatic action was needed to ensure a helpful attitude on the part of the Iraqis: and although the pipe-line was for the most part adequately protected in Syria and

Palestine, security was essential at the terminal points of Tripoli and Haifa.⁽⁵⁰⁾ During the Jerusalem conference the French showed themselves anxious to use Cyprus as an advanced air base and in due course were given facilities. These, however, meant little, since not only were they not up-to-date but, in addition, Britain could not accept the defence of the island as a serious commitment.⁽⁵¹⁾

For the East African theatre the French were thinking less defensively than their British counterparts and the final strategic pattern provided for the ejection of Italian forces from Ethiopia by direct military operations. But, at first, the allies would be on the defensive with their primary objects the retention of Djibouti and the control of the Red Sea. Locally there was great anxiety about the size of allied naval and air forces in the area since they were not considered sufficient to ensure this control. In London there was, however, no undue alarm, and the demand for reinforcements was turned down, partly it is true because there were no aircraft available anyway in the immediate future, but also because, in the case of the Navy, reinforcements could be sent if necessary at very short notice from the Mediterranean.⁽⁵²⁾ The retention of Djibouti was important not only because it was the best base from which ultimately to strike at Ethiopia, but also because its loss would be such a gain to Italian prestige that the possibility of a rebellion inside Ethiopia would be seriously prejudiced. To help the French defend their port they were promised facilities in British Somaliland and permitted the use of Aden as a second line air base. Further it was agreed that the R.A.F. would do what it could to delay an Italian advance, but this could not initially amount to much because of its other duties in ensuring communications with Egypt.⁽⁵³⁾ For the eventual defeat of Italian forces in Ethiopia a rebellion of the tribes was as important as a military offensive. But there was much change of mind about its timing. First, the Allied Staffs felt that, unlike similar operations in Libya, the rebellion should precede military action. Later, the local Commanders decided the two must be interdependent. Later still, after the war had been declared on Germany, the Chiefs of Staff wanted to return to the previous ruling but a decision was relegated to the background because of Italy's neutrality.⁽⁵⁴⁾

The first stage of the Staff talks was limited to the problems of the conduct of a war between Britain and France on the one hand and Germany and Italy on the other. The second stage of the talks, in late April and early May, saw the introduction of two important additional factors. First the new political situation in Europe resulting from H.M. Government's recent guarantees to eastern European Powers and the possible military consequences of that new policy; and second, the effect of the possible intervention of Japan.⁽⁵⁵⁾

So far as eastern Europe was concerned the two Allies laid great stress on the new possibilities of making Germany fight a war on two fronts, something, it was argued, which she had always tried to avoid. They were agreed that an eastern front would serve a useful purpose only if it could be made 'long, solid and durable'; and a vital part of that process would be the provision of supplies from Russia and also, perhaps, via the eastern Mediterranean if Turkey would intervene on the side of the Allies. Germany would be hard put to achieve a quick decision in Poland, largely because of the great distances involved and the poor communications. Moreover, even if Poland were conquered, the number of troops necessary to hold the country and provide against a possible threat from Russia would hardly be less than those required for the original offensive.

There were some differences of view between the French and British representatives on other matters. The former rated the value of the Roumanian army higher than did the British and held that it was capable of worthwhile resistance against German attack. The French also, particularly General Lelong who had some detailed knowledge of the Russian army, considered that the latter would, in an emergency, be capable of operating outside Russia, although they agreed with the British view that there was little hope of effective Russian air operations from Polish airfields.

Finally, there was agreement on the importance of Turkey as an ally, particularly in a war against Italy, and upon the importance of a neutral Spain. The French were anxious to avoid having another frontier to defend and also to avoid the risk of air attacks upon southern and south western France from Spanish territory.^{(56)*}

Talks on the Far East centred around three major issues. First, there was agreement on the vital importance of enlisting the help, or at any rate the benevolent neutrality, of the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. should the Allies find themselves at war against Japan. It was stressed that even if a definite agreement with the U.S.A. was not possible, then the Allies should at least aim at an undertaking that the American Fleet would be despatched to the western Pacific on the outbreak of war, whether or not Japan had already committed herself to intervention.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Second, there was the problem of the despatch of a British Fleet to the Far East and here the Allies plainly differed. The French preference in this matter was to confine operations in the Far East to the defensive and to rely on the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. to contain Japan until Italy had been defeated; they emphasised the danger should British naval forces leave the Mediterranean before that had been done. The British stressed, on the other hand, the

* For more detail on Turkey, see below, pp. 713-14.

great importance of Britain's interests in the Far East, the need to be able to counter Japanese aggression by naval action, and the dependence of British or Allied naval operations upon the Singapore base. The British did not deny that there were doubts both about the time when naval reinforcements for the Far East could be sent out and also the size of those reinforcements; they agreed that defeat in the West would be followed 'automatically' by the collapse of our position in the Far East; and they conceded that, in balancing risks, 'the weakening of the British Eastern Mediterranean Fleet should not lightly be undertaken'. But the issue could not be decided in advance. It would be for H.M. Government to decide, in consultation with the French Government, on any redistribution of British naval forces if and when the need arose.* The French accepted this.

Third, there was the problem of land operations in the Far East against Japan and the connected issue of possible local support. There was pressure for Army reinforcements for Singapore on the outbreak of war in Europe over and above those already promised, and for the acceleration of defence preparations there and at other points such as Hong Kong.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Even if these were provided, however, the absence of a Fleet, and of the appreciably larger Air Forces that were the only effective alternative, would not only put the Allies very much on the defence if Japan did enter the war but would also make the loss of some or even all key positions almost certain. Action against Japanese trade would be virtually limited to occasional raids on ships passing the Dutch East Indies and to the interception of shipping to and from Siam.⁽⁵⁹⁾ The attitude of the latter country was of the very greatest importance and everything possible must be done to keep her at least a friendly neutral. A Japanese attack on her would be a serious threat to Allied interests and, though a difficult and perhaps not very likely operation, was still a possibility not to be ignored: Allied counter-action would depend on warning in good time of the approach of the Japanese force and in present circumstances naval and air reconnaissance was not adequate to its task. The defence of Hong Kong would be helped by Chinese pressure from outside on the attacking forces, perhaps supported by a French expedition from Indo-China. But this last could only take place in the long-term and from the point of view of helping the Chinese, a better way would be to supply arms and equipment and to provide advisers and instructors mainly for the regular, rather than the guerrilla army.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Some other methods of opposing the enemy had long been prepared for on a national basis and became now, in the summer of 1939, a matter for allied planning.

* For the further internal British debate on this problem, see above, Chapter XI, Section 2.

(b) *Economic Warfare*

First, economic warfare. Matters concerning the protection of our own trade and the denial of trade to the enemy had been under consideration by the C.I.D. throughout the inter-war period. For example, the Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in Time of War and the Economic Pressure Sub-Committee regularly presented papers to the C.I.D.⁽⁶¹⁾ Admittedly there was for a long time little sense of urgency about the work of such committees; but the Abyssinian and Spanish crises acted as a spur, and during the three years before September 1939 a considerable amount of detailed planning was done and plans were ready to be put into effect as soon as war began. These questions, like those concerning the operations of all three Services which we have been considering in this chapter so far, then became a matter for allied planning in the last few months before war broke out. Three categories of action were envisaged under this head: (i) legislative action, aimed at controlling trade and financial activities within the belligerents' own territories; (ii) diplomatic action, aimed at controlling the trade and financial activities of neutral countries serving as sources or channels of supply to the enemy; and (iii) military action, in the broadest sense of attacking the enemy by direct interference with his overseas supplies whether consigned direct or through neutrals, or by interference with his export trade. For the first, it was planned to pass a Trading with the Enemy Act prohibiting intercourse except with official permission as soon as possible after war had broken out; this would be so drawn up as to make possible the severing of trade between British firms and persons who, though not resident or directly controlled from enemy territory, were nonetheless assisting or associating with the enemy. For the second category there was a distinction between those neutrals separated from the enemy by seas under British control and those geographically able to maintain direct communication with him. Means were designed to cut, as far as possible, the delays and uncertainties involved in the interception and inspection of neutral trade and, in particular, to avoid antagonising friendly neutrals, for example, the U.S.A. or such potentially hostile countries as the Soviet Union, Japan and Italy. Action to prevent supplies reaching the enemy depended ultimately upon the Navy's power to make these interceptions. But it was also hoped to reach 'War Trade Agreements' with 'adjacent' neutrals whereby they would control their supply to the enemy of commodities in which he was deficient. If this failed it was planned to take more forceful measures against the neutral countries concerned, measures such as withholding financial and insurance facilities, cutting essential supplies, interfering with export trade and forcible rationing. But, hardly surprisingly,

these were treated with some trepidation by the pre-war Government. Military action could entail the capture of enemy ships and cargoes, contraband control, the blockade of the enemy coast, and direct attack on such targets as ports, important economic areas and enemy shipping at sea.

By the outbreak of war the Navy had been instructed in its interception duties and preparations were ready for contraband control bases at Kirkwall, the Downs, Gibraltar, Haifa and Aden. Indeed out of all this planning the main Allied effort in the first stages of the war was devoted only to contraband control and to the negotiation of War Trade Agreements. In general the French were willing to follow Britain's lead in these plans and the work was to be divided, once war broke out, with the allocation of zones to each navy for the purposes of contraband control, and with Britain responsible for negotiation with the neutrals whose sea communications she controlled, and France for negotiation with her Swiss neighbour. It was recognised that little could be done about Balkan trade, except for trade with Greece. Much that was criticised as half-hearted in these plans during the winter of 1939-40 was really no more than what was inevitable and implicit in the acceptance of the conventional standards of international behaviour in the field of economic warfare. With this qualification it can be said that impressive and wide ranging plans had been made before September 1939. The machinery for implementing them was set in motion immediately war was declared and the first cases of cargo interception were considered that evening.⁽⁶²⁾

During the 1939 Staff talks the French submitted a paper on the need for complete solidarity in time of war, which would mean the pooling of all resources (military, economic, industrial and financial) and which pre-supposed equally comprehensive preparations in time of peace. In particular they wanted an inventory of the essential war requirements of each country in all branches of its activities (these requirements being evaluated on a common basis) and estimates of resources and their actual and possible employment; since these resources were insufficient to satisfy likely needs, decisions about the means to make good the deficiencies must be taken on the basis of common sacrifice. Machinery was therefore needed to lay down a general policy, to co-ordinate action, to allocate and to control supplies.⁽⁶³⁾ All of this was attractive in theory. In the event it could not be said that any very impressive economic plans of this kind were in fact drawn up, although there were restricted agreements on overseas supply and purchase. Practically nothing was done, or even attempted, to integrate and balance national armaments plans; each country retained its own types of weapons, its own production programmes, and its own views about the mobilisation of men and

materials. So far as shipping was concerned, calculations of need were sketchy; the British were confident that they had enough for their own needs and that the French could make good their deficiencies when, in war, large blocks of neutral shipping would be forced for lack of alternative employment into Allied service. Both countries were vague in their estimates of requirements and no plans were made even by the individual Governments for a calculated import programme.⁽⁶⁴⁾

(c) *Allied Supreme Control and Higher Command in War*

Finally, there was a good deal of discussion, both before and during 1939, on Allied Supreme Control in war. This subject was not actually dealt with during the Staff talks, for delegations were not of the seniority to consider matters of that kind. On the other hand, these were issues of vital importance for the carrying out of plans formulated during the talks.

On 2nd May 1939 the C.I.D. invited Lord Chatfield, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, in consultation with the Service Ministers, to prepare a memorandum on Supreme Control of the War by the Allied Governments.⁽⁶⁵⁾ On 6th July their recommendations—adapted from the pattern laid down in 1917—were approved in principle by the C.I.D. for Mr. Chamberlain to communicate to M. Daladier. The proposal for a single Supreme War Council, meeting either in Britain or France, on which all Allied Powers would be represented—Britain and France by their Prime Ministers and such other Ministers and advisers as might prove necessary having regard to the agenda on each specific occasion, the other Allies, because of communication problems, perhaps by their Ambassadors. The Council would have no executive authority, leaving final decisions to Governments. It would have permanent Military Representatives to work as a Joint Staff. In the case of Great Britain these technical advisers would, in principle, be the Chiefs of Staff: in practice, however, pressure of business would preclude their invariable attendance at Supreme War Council meetings, though they would of course be available if the Prime Minister needed them. The permanent representatives would therefore correspond in status to the Deputy Chiefs of Staff and would be collectively subordinate to the Chiefs of Staff, individually to their own Service Chiefs. There would also be similar bodies to advise the Supreme War Council on shipping, supply etc. On 3rd August M. Daladier agreed to the proposals generally and, with some reluctance on the part of the French, it was later decided that London would be the fixed H.Q. of the permanent staffs. We had wanted the military section to be set up at once, largely because of the need to co-ordinate and discuss

Allied aid to Poland; but although the British member had been appointed in time to attend the final staff talks just before the war, the Permanent Military Representatives as such did not have their first meeting until after war had broken out. The Supreme War Council itself had its first meeting at Abbeville on the 12th September.⁽⁶⁶⁾

With the pattern thus laid down for Supreme Control the C.I.D. confirmed the approval it had already given in principle to Chiefs of Staff recommendations for the Organisation of Higher Command in France, again based on the lessons of the first world war. These were then discussed with the French. It was agreed that the Commander of the British Field Force (who was not appointed before the war) would be subordinate to the French Commander-in-Chief in the North-East, General Georges, on the understanding that the former would be at liberty to appeal to his own Government before executing any orders he thought likely to imperil his force. The Advanced Air Striking Force in France would be under the operational command of the British Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command, and administratively would conform to the regulations of the Army Commander in whose area it found itself. The liaison mission at the H.Q. of the Commander-in-Chief, French Air Force, General Vuillemin, and the representative of Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command, at the H.Q. of the L'Armée de l'Air of the North-East, should enable the requirements of the French Generalissimo, General Gamelin, to be met when the principal efforts of Bomber Command as a whole were in support of the land forces on the Western Front: alternatively, if there was a lull on this front, the collaboration of the French Air Force with the R.A.F. would be arranged through the same channels. The Army's liaison arrangements provided for Major-General Sir Richard Howe-Vyse (who was also one of our Permanent Military Representatives to the Supreme War Council) to be the link between the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and General Gamelin in the latter's function as Chief of Staff for National Defence to co-ordinate all three Services. In this capacity, General Gamelin set up at Vincennes a secretariat of the Council of National Defence; but in his other purely army rôle of Commander-in-Chief Ground Forces he used the staff of his Commander-in-Chief, North East, where, too, we had a military mission under General Swayne. The Navy's liaison arrangements were confined to the Naval Attaché at the British Embassy in Paris. For their part the French had in London three Service Missions distinct from their Service Attachés.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Command in the theatres of war other than France was the subject of some discussion before the war but nothing was settled: detailed liaison arrangements in the various theatres had however been made during the local Staff Conferences.⁽⁶⁸⁾

4. *Final Pre-War Preparations*

To return to the British story. The rest of the summer after the main Staff talks were completed was then spent in trying to make good the worst of the deficiencies shown up by the Chiefs of Staff European Appreciation. On 2nd May the findings of the S.A.C.,⁽⁶⁹⁾ amounting to general approval of the paper as a whole subject to those parts already altered by events, came before the C.I.D. In some cases, such as plans for economic warfare and propaganda, action on the Sub-Committee's recommendations was already in hand and only covering authority was needed. In others, for example port defences in the Middle East and the Far East, the C.I.D. now gave its approval for certain things to be done, some of which were further improved on as the summer progressed.⁽⁷⁰⁾

On 14th July a meeting of Ministers, with the Prime Minister in the chair, approved a number of Admiralty requirements for small craft for escort, minesweeping and anti-submarine duties. These included the construction of 10 minesweepers, the conversion into minesweepers of 11 small craft and the conversion of 86 more into anti-submarine vessels. Even so they were a bare minimum to bring the total available to 100 minesweepers and 102 anti-submarine vessels: the numbers the Admiralty really wanted for the period immediately after war had broken out were 254 and 217 respectively.⁽⁷¹⁾

Then, on 1st August the C.I.D. decided to arm in peace-time merchant ships normally employed on certain routes i.e. in south Atlantic, south American and Antarctic waters, where German submarines were thought to be likely to operate. This was a principle approved by the Cabinet before Munich and now considered by the Admiralty the best available means of meeting the menace from U-boats in the first few months of war. It was necessary both because nothing could be done either by air attack or anti-submarine vessels because of the distances involved, and also because, under existing arrangements, the only counter-measure open to the possible victims was evasive routeing.⁽⁷²⁾

Finally, at the same meeting on 1st August, the C.I.D. approved a review by the Air Ministry and the Admiralty of what was needed to meet the threat of air attack on merchant shipping. Because persistent attack on a scale large enough to cause serious losses was possible only within range of enemy land air bases, the danger zones were limited to Home Waters, the Red Sea and China waters. Since the Red Sea could be used only in the early stages by such merchant shipping as could take advantage of military convoys and since, even in a European war with Japan neutral, British shipping off the China coast would be almost certainly at a standstill, the

immediate problem was in Home Waters. The most probable form of attack was low or shallow dive-bombing against which the best defence was considered to be aircraft supplemented by long and close range A/A guns. These last, if they were to be a sufficient deterrent, must be placed on warships and we must therefore be prepared to adopt the convoy system. Even so A/A guns on merchant ships were essential both for morale and also because naval escort would not always be possible. In these circumstances the C.I.D. made the following provisions and in doing so gave them priority equal to that of A.D.G.B.:

- (i) 4 new fighter squadrons each of 16 aircraft. These would have to be fitted into the existing production programme but that would not be possible until some time in 1940. The result was that the war opened with Coastal Command still very unprepared. On paper it had 6 flying boat squadrons, together with 11 general reconnaissance and 2 torpedo bomber squadrons: but these were largely out-of-date and short-range machines, and the Command was hard put to satisfy even the minimum reconnaissance and escort requirements. Its striking power was almost non-existent.
- (ii) 30 additional small patrol vessels of the 'whale-catcher' type to supplement the more heavily armed vessels already planned for larger convoys. The function of these new ships would be to deal with attack by low-flying aircraft.
- (iii) The conversion of 544 4-in. guns and the manufacture of 476 12-pounders to make good the deficiency of 1,020 in requirements for guns on merchant ships to meet medium level attacks. Nothing, however, would be possible before December 1940.
- (iv) 1,000 Oerlikon guns for low-flying attacks on merchant ships. Total requirements were 2,500 and 500 were already on order, and these guns would begin to be available in May-June 1940.⁽⁷³⁾

Further measures were also decided upon for the Middle East and the Far East. The most important of the measures approved by the C.I.D. for the Middle East area in general were in connection with the Chiefs of Staff's new policy—thrown into relief by their European Appreciation—of building up overseas garrisons to the point where they need not depend upon reinforcement from home in time of emergency. The C.I.D., in reviewing the Appreciation, therefore decided to form in Palestine an Army Reserve of one 'Colonial' Division ready to move to any point threatened by attack: this would mean the addition of an infantry brigade and

artillery to the brigade already in Palestine.⁽⁷⁴⁾* At the same time the C.I.D. approved in principle the maintenance in the Middle East of a reserve of stores, supplies etc. for 90 days, and authorised the reinforcement of the R.A.F. there by 1 fighter, and 2 bomber squadrons.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Later in the summer the C.I.D. decided to appoint forthwith a G.O.C. Middle East, with H.Q. in Egypt. Their reasons for this development were the widening of our Mediterranean commitments arising from the new arrangements with Roumania, Greece and Turkey, and the new danger from Italy now that she was established in Ethiopia; all of which pointed to the need to regard the whole area as one theatre of war. The new G.O.C. was General Sir Archibald Wavell and his command in peace comprised Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine, Transjordan and Cyprus, with responsibility for any plans for British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq and the Persian Gulf. The Naval C.-in-C., Mediterranean had command of the whole area as far east as Suez, while C.-in-C. East Indies was responsible for the Red Sea and eastwards. The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East had already been appointed, with H.Q. again in Egypt and responsible in peace for the same areas as the new G.O.C.; he would also co-ordinate the war training of forces in Malta, Iraq and Aden but he would only take over the command there in time of war.⁽⁷⁶⁾

None of the measures approved above obviated the need for the Army reinforcements already planned for Egypt for an emergency and, as the summer progressed, pressure from the British Ambassador and the Egyptian Prime Minister, mainly on political grounds, drew the support of the Chiefs of Staff on military grounds also. Indeed by the end of July the latter were so alarmed at the deteriorated international situation everywhere that they were urging a review of the whole question of reinforcements abroad. For Egypt the troops concerned were an infantry brigade and a regiment of artillery (Force HERON) from India. Earlier in the month the C.I.D. had been reluctant to authorise the move of this force and had decided instead to send to Egypt one of the two brigades of the Middle East Reserve Division in Palestine. But faced with this new pressure by the Chiefs of Staff they decided, somewhat reluctantly, on 21st July that HERON must go to Egypt forthwith and that plans must be made for the 2nd brigade of the Middle East Reserve to be ready to leave Palestine for Egypt at short notice.⁽⁷⁷⁾ For Singapore the reinforcements involved were an infantry brigade and ancillary

* At the same time the C.I.D. approved in principle the formation of another 'Colonial' Division, again as an emergency reserve for wherever it might be needed. It was to be formed at home from troops in India that had become surplus in the current reorganisation of India's defence forces, but it was quite clear that this was only a provision for a somewhat remote future; there were no specific appropriations made either for equipment or reserves.

troops (Force EMU) and two bomber squadrons from India: the Chiefs of Staff also wanted to send two medium bomber squadrons from home to do something to meet the criticism of the Allied Conference at Singapore. Again with some reluctance, in this case increased by the fear of antagonising the Japanese while the political negotiations arising from the recent Tientsin crisis were still in progress, the Cabinet and the C.I.D. between them approved all that the Chiefs of Staff wanted.⁽⁷⁸⁾

SOURCES

| | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------|
| (1) C.O.S. 797 | 653 |
| (2) C.I.D. 1487-B | 654 |
| (3) C.P. 269(38) | 654 |
| (4) Cab. Cons. 2(39)1 | 654 |
| (5) C.P. 3(39), p. 2 | 654 |
| (6) Ibid., para. 10 | 655 |
| (7) Cab. Cons. 3(39)5, pp. 12-13 | 656 |
| (8) Their Report is in C.O.S. 838 | 656 |
| (9) Cab. Cons. 6(39) | 656 |
| (10) The three stages of the talks in London are in A.F.C. 7 (Revise) and A.F.C. 25. These, together with the Chiefs of Staff's comments on the first stage of the talks, are contained in D.P.(P)56. The procedure followed was that talks were delayed until the Chiefs of Staff presented their comprehensive 'European Appreciation, 1939-40' in February 1939. (C.O.S. 843. Also D.P.(P)44). That report was referred to the S.A.C., who drew up an interim report of their own, 'British Strategical Memorandum' (A.F.C. 1) as a guide for the first stage of the talks. The S.A.C. then gave Ministers a full commentary on the C.O.S. Appreciation a little later. The reports of conferences between Local Commanders are: | |
| Aden conference, A.F.C. 36 | 657 |
| Rabat conference, A.F.C. 37 | 657 |
| Jerusalem conference, A.F.C. 38 | 657 |
| (11) The Appreciation is D.P.(P)44 (see note 10 above), and is dated 20th February 1939. It superseded D.P.(P)2 written in February 1937 on plans for a war with Germany in 1939, and D.P.(P)18, the Mediterranean Appreciation of February 1938 | 657 |
| (12) This version being numbered A.F.C. 1 | 657 |
| (13) A.F.C.(J) 4-9, 10-17 inclusive, and 19 | 657 |
| (14) D.P.(P)44, para. 2, Appendix I | 658 |
| (15) A.F.C. 25, paras. 8-9 | 658 |
| (16) D.P.(P)44, paras. 3-5, Appendix II | 659 |
| (17) A.F.C. 16 | 659 |
| (18) C.4393/32/18 | 659 |
| (19) D.P.(P)44, paras. 6-24 | 660 |
| (20) Ibid., paras. 27-37, 250-70 | 660 |

- (21) Ibid., paras. 38-103, 124. The details of A.R.P. and of anti-aircraft defences are in Appendix III of this paper 662
- (22) Ibid., paras. 106-25 663
- (23) Ibid., paras. 126-225 666
- (24) Ibid., paras. 226-37. These paragraphs were based on the Far East Appreciation of 1937, (D.P.(P)5) which was still valid though not to remain so for much longer 666
- (25) D.P.(P)45, also S.A.C. 13. This paper dealt with Parts I-IV of the Appreciation and a later paper, D.P.(P)49, dealt with Part V 666
- (26) Annex I to S.A.C. 13 is an amended version of the original appreciation D.P.(P)44 designed for use in the Anglo-French talks, although the paper was not to be handed to the French as a complete document. S.A.C. 13, para. 5 666
- (27) A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section III 668
- (28) A.F.C. 7, Part I, paras. 20-21, Part II, paras. 13-15; A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section II 669
- (29) Air Ministry, S.46239/1, Minute 3; see also S.1132, Enclosure 5A 669
- (30) A.F.C. 14 669
- (31) See Col. P. le Goyet, *Evolution de la doctrine d'emploi de l'aviation française entre 1919 et 1939*, Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, January 1939, p. 3 670
- (32) Fridenson, *op. cit.*, p. 57 makes it clear how easy agreement was at this stage 670
- (33) A.F.C. 33, p. 3 670
- (34) C.O.S. 311th and 314th Mtgs.; C.O.S. 961. See also A.F.C. 24 and A.F.C. 33, pp. 4-5 670
- (35) A.F.C. 7, Part II, paras. 5, 18-19. See also A.F.C. 21 671
- (36) C.O.S. 707, para. 10 671
- (37) A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section IV. The conflicting views about railway targets are set out in great detail in A.F.C.(J)51, 73, 84 and 95. 671
- (38) Cab. Cons. 6(39), conclusion 7(6) 672
- (39) C.I.D. 351st Mtg., p. 10 672
- (40) Ibid., p. 12 672
- (41) Cab. Cons. 16(39) 672
- (42) A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section I 672
- (43) A.F.C. 7, Part I, para. 22 672
- (44) A.F.C. 25, Annex I, paras. 16-19. Annex IV 673
- (45) A.F.C. 37, Part VII 673
- (46) A.F.C. 7, Part I, para. 22; Part II, paras. 21-23; the detail is in A.F.C. 11 673

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- (48) A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section VII, para. 1; A.F.C. 37, Part II (IIB); A.F.C.(J) 50 gives the French views in great detail . . . 673
- (49) A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section VI; A.F.C.(J)79 673
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- (51) A.F.C. 38. Part IIc, Section IV, para. 13, Section VII, paras. 15-19, and Section X 674
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- (53) A.F.C. 7, Part II, para. 30.; A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section VII, paras. 10, 14-19; A.F.C. 36, Section II, paras. 5(ii-v), and Appendix B, paras. 1-10 674
- (54) A.F.C. 25, Annex V, Section VII, para. 11; A.F.C. 36, Section II, paras. 5(vi), 6(vii-viii, x) and Appendix B, paras. 11-14. M.R. (39) 47th Mtg., M.R.(J)(39)2 and 32 674
- (55) This second stage is summarised in A.F.C. 7, Enclosure 2 and Annexes 674
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- (57) A.F.C.(J)65 675
- (58) C.O.S. 941, paras. 1-10, 45-57, 101-03, 106-09 676
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- (61) See, for example, C.I.D. 271st Mtg. and 284th Mtg.; the Advisory Committee presented annual reports. 677
- (62) W. N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, Vol. I (H.M.S.O., 1952), pp. 1-24, 36-40, 238-43, 383-88 678
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- (65) C.I.D. 355th Mtg. 679
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- (74) C.I.D. 355th Mtg.; D.P.(P)44, paras. 176-79, 303; D.P.(P) 49, para. 5 683
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Map 5

HITLER'S ACQUISITIONS 1936 - 1939



PART IV

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ALLIANCE AND EASTERN EUROPE

1. *The British Guarantee to Poland, March 1939*

WHATEVER THE rights and wrongs of Munich, the fact is that the British Government at no time had any intention of going to war to help the Czechs in their difficulties over the Sudetenland. Nor was British policy *vis-à-vis* Czechoslovakia in 1938 different, in principle, from British policy towards central and eastern Europe throughout the inter-war years down to that time. This was obviously an area capable of producing international crises and, to that extent, the British Government was willing to use its good offices so that the directly interested Powers might reach agreement on contentious issues; moreover, during the mid nineteen-thirties, as we have seen, there was some anxiety on the part of the British Government to keep in step with the French in such matters.* But this did not imply a commitment to France or to any other country comparable to the commitments of the Locarno treaties; least of all did it imply a willingness to undertake military action to help France, or any of her allies, in troubles arising from events in that area. Looked at from this point of view, then, what Mr. Chamberlain did in 1938 was what either of his two predecessors would have done. What was surprising was not the appeasement of Munich but the complete reversal of that policy, and all it stemmed from, by the guarantee given to Poland only six months later.

After Munich the Cabinet pursued the dual policy of continuing efforts to establish friendly relations with Germany while at the same time taking steps to improve national defences; but although Ministers tried to frame their announcements of the various measures of rearmament in such a way as not to provoke Germany into increasing her own military preparations, there was in fact an almost instantaneous deterioration in relations between the two countries. As early as 9th October Hitler denounced Mr. Churchill and other speakers in the Parliamentary debates on the Munich Agreement for

* See above, p. 134.

warmongering and interfering in Germany's domestic affairs, and thereafter he kept up and increased his attacks, backed up by the German Press. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that the British Government concentrated its efforts at appeasement on Mussolini. On 6th November the Prime Minister expressed in a private letter the view that 'Rome at the moment is the end of the Axis on which it is easiest to make an impression',⁽¹⁾ and Lord Halifax confirmed this in Cabinet on 16th November, adding that any approach to Germany was for the time being out of the question.⁽²⁾ Two days before, the Foreign Secretary had given his reasons in some detail at a meeting of the F.P.C. called to review our relations with Germany. He thought the basis of Hitler's animosity towards Britain was two-fold. First, his grudging recognition that Munich had not been a complete triumph and that the German public, which had been against war, was now giving the chief credit for its prevention to Mr. Chamberlain. Second, Hitler had now come round to Ribbentrop's view that there never had been any danger of Britain going to war in September 1938. While there was no reason to suppose that the German people as a whole sought to quarrel with us, there was little doubt that some of the highest Nazis, including Hitler himself, now aimed at depicting Britain as Germany's enemy. A usually reliable source had reported that the Fuehrer was now thinking in terms of the distintegration of the British Empire and that, to this end, he would try to break the Anglo-French alliance by cultivating French friendship (he had already, on 18th October, seen M. François-Poncet, the retiring French Ambassador, and gone out of his way to be amiable and to send particularly friendly messages to M. Bonnet for his attitude during the recent crisis), would maintain pressure on Spain and in the Far East with the help of Italy and Japan, and would aggravate our difficulties in the Near East. In these circumstances no useful purpose could be served by any discussions, and all Lord Halifax felt we could do in the immediate future was to correct the false impression that we were 'decadent, spineless, and could with impunity be knocked about', and to do what we could to encourage the moderate elements in Germany. The Prime Minister, while agreeing to some extent with the Foreign Secretary and very concerned at the deterioration since Munich, was not disposed to rely on the Foreign Office's information. But he, too, had nothing constructive to suggest beyond a continuation of existing policy. And neither he nor the Foreign Secretary was ready to take a strong line with the German Government over its persecution of the Jews, following the murder of a German Embassy official in Paris, for fear of making our relations with Germany worse than they already were. In this the two Ministers were following the line taken by the British Embassy in Berlin,

that any foreign intervention in German domestic affairs would do more harm than good.⁽³⁾

It was, then, in Rome that our best hope was thought to rest, and the obvious first step to the betterment of relations was to bring into force the Anglo-Italian Agreement of the previous April. Details concerning the completion of that agreement were drawn up by mid-November. In the last week of the same month Mr. Chamberlain went to Paris, partly to prove to the French that efforts at appeasement implied no weakening of Anglo-French relations and partly to urge on the French more activity in defence matters. In mid-January 1939 this visit was then followed by another expedition by the Prime Minister, this time to Rome.

On his return from Rome the Prime Minister was faced with a scare about more German aggression. Throughout the winter Germany's attitude had continued to give rise to anxiety, and the general conviction in Berlin was that Hitler intended to act in the near future. We had proof that his hostility since Munich extended further than mere words when, on 12th December, the German Ambassador in London told the Foreign Office of his Government's intention to exercise the right given them in the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935 to build submarines up to parity with the British Empire. Subsequent talks between German and British naval experts in Berlin showed the Germans adamant, although the latter admitted that new submarine building would only be gradual and that 1939 construction would not cause the total to exceed 65 per cent of the British strength.⁽⁴⁾

What was not clear was just what Hitler's next target would be. During the early part of the winter, although it was not thought safe to rule out an attack in the West, the weight of the evidence seemed to suggest a drive eastwards, and by the New Year the British Embassy in Berlin, while emphasising that Hitler's unpredictability made any forecast only speculative, reckoned the odds on action in the East as against the West at 10 to 1. It was 'very nearly certain' that military action was in preparation and, while there was no direct evidence that this would be against, say, Poland or the Ukraine, there was 'much evidence consistent therewith and none to refute it'. Some form of pressure on Memel was probable soon, but would not be likely to have military consequences; a drive into Roumania was also possible but less probable: and the bulk of the evidence was against a military occupation of Czechoslovakia. The Embassy's advice in these circumstances is interesting in the light of what happened later. As there was no stopping Hitler if he made up his mind to act, the only way not to become involved ourselves in a war in eastern Europe was to face clearly and in good time the fact that we could not guarantee the *status quo* there.⁽⁵⁾

As it happened, the first of the many 1939 scares, when it came, came in the West. At the same Cabinet meeting on 18th January at which the Prime Minister reported on his Rome visit, alarm was expressed at the current rumours of a German attack on Holland. At meetings on 23rd and 25th January the F.P.C. and the Cabinet heard from the Foreign Secretary an account of these rumours, but otherwise did little until the Chiefs of Staff could report on their military implications.⁽⁶⁾ On 1st February the Cabinet met to hear the recommendations of the F.P.C. on the now completed Chiefs of Staff reports; and from Cabinet discussions on this material there developed suggestions and then action leading to those staff talks with the French which are discussed in detail elsewhere.* While the preliminaries to those talks were still being worked on, German troops entered Prague, on 15th March 1939.⁽⁷⁾ With this move, the rump of Czechoslovakia, left over after Munich, was now absorbed into the German protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia.

The German entry into Prague marked the moment when Hitler put himself in the wrong in the eyes of many in Britain who had hitherto either felt there was some justice behind his advocacy of the right of Germans, as of other nationalities, to self-determination, or who had been too absorbed with their own affairs to admit the troublesome doubts which might arise from a more careful assessment of Nazi policy. It therefore marked the point where the British Government felt bound to re-examine its appeasement policy and to set to work to organise resistance to further aggression. There had already been signs that the mood of the British public was hardening against Germany, signs which crystallised to some extent in correspondence in *The Times* started only days before Prague with a letter from Dr. Gilbert Murray expressing the disquiet with the Government and mistrust of the Prime Minister's motives felt by what was described as a 'large minority at any rate'. All the same, the reaction to this letter both in *The Times* columns and, on his own admission, in Dr. Murray's post-bag, showed that there was still a great deal of support for Mr. Chamberlain.⁽⁸⁾

For his part Mr. Chamberlain had gone on largely regardless of those—and they included Lord Halifax—who now advocated the achievement of national unity in foreign affairs by forming a coalition government.⁽⁹⁾ The Prime Minister had had a pessimistic patch at the turn of the year, but that had not lasted long. During February he had written hopefully to his family, and the last of these letters before Prague showed his optimism undaunted;⁽¹⁰⁾ so much so that he had clashed with Lord Halifax when the latter protested at a talk Mr. Chamberlain had had with Lobby correspondents only days

* See above, Chapter XVII.

before the crisis broke. Lord Halifax felt that the Prime Minister's remarks about Italy and France on that occasion, and about the possibility of a disarmament conference before the end of the year, would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and would make the French even more suspicious than they were already that we were thinking of mediating in their dispute with Italy. He therefore asked the Prime Minister to let him know before-hand, in future, when he intended to review foreign affairs, but entirely failed to convince him it was now wrong to be optimistic. Nor did the Prime Minister easily or at once abandon his hopes when the crisis burst upon him. The country's anxiety was expressed in a number of questions tabled in the House; but in the cautious statement he himself made the afternoon the German troops marched into Czechoslovakia the Prime Minister would not yet associate himself with the charges of a breach of faith, however much he deplored the manner and method of Hitler's action as out of accord with the spirit of the Munich Agreement. In the debate that followed many Members urged the rallying of all forces ready to work for peace and goodwill, although most of the speakers remained somewhat indefinite about how this should be done. The most specific was Mr. Duncan Sandys, who advocated something similar to what the Government in due course tried to adopt. He called for a conference of all those nations in danger and ready to organise mutual defence: but since this conference to be successful must take place in an atmosphere free from pressure, its precondition must be guarantees in advance from the participating nations to aid their fellow participants during the period when the conference was in session. By this Mr. Sandys did not mean unilateral guarantees but, for example, a British guarantee to Roumania provided Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Turkey did the same.⁽¹¹⁾

Soon, even Mr. Chamberlain appeared to change his views. Speaking at Birmingham on 17th March he would not recant on Munich. But he admitted that the present case was different and that the events of the week could not be reconciled with Hitler's manifold pledges, public and private. After querying whether this was the end of an old adventure or the beginning of an attempt to dominate the world by force, he emphasised that he would never sacrifice in his love for peace the liberty Britain had enjoyed for hundreds of years. And he ended:

'I feel bound to repeat that, while I am not prepared to engage this country by new unspecified commitments, operating under conditions which cannot now be foreseen, yet no greater mistake could be made than to suppose that, because it believes war to be a senseless and cruel thing, this nation has so lost its fibre that

it will not take part to the utmost of its power in resisting such a challenge if it ever were made.⁽¹²⁾

He was soon to go further.

It might have been expected after Prague that Poland would have been the first country to be alarmed at what might happen next. In fact it was Roumania that precipitated a special summons to the Cabinet for the day after the Prime Minister's speech. In recent weeks, although the threat to the Ukraine seemed to have faded into the background, tension between Poland and Germany over Danzig had indeed sometimes been dangerously high; yet, although at the time of Prague there were rumours of an immediate German coup, the Poles themselves were not alarmed. But M. Tilea, the Roumanian Minister in London, was very alarmed, and on the 17th March he told Lord Halifax of a virtual German ultimatum for a monopoly of Roumanian exports, and of his expectation of further developments within days. Before the Cabinet actually met, it was discovered that Tilea had greatly exaggerated and that German-Roumanian economic negotiations were progressing normally. But although it appeared there was no longer any danger of an immediate crisis the Foreign Secretary asked the Cabinet to consider what our policy should be if a threat to Roumania really arose.⁽¹³⁾

From the first the Cabinet were as a whole behind the Prime Minister who now seemed to be quite definite that it was no longer possible to negotiate with Germany on the old basis and that resistance must be organised. There was as yet no question of acting by ourselves or of deciding at exactly what moment we ought to respond to a further German challenge; some Ministers, including the Secretaries for War and Air, showed a tendency to postpone the evil day, while this, seemed to be the tendency in the Dominions as well. The Chiefs of Staff took a rather stronger line. They had not had much time for a considered opinion, but their preliminary view was that the political and economic domination of Roumania by Germany would have the most serious consequences in that Germany could neutralise a naval blockade and march straight through to the Mediterranean. However, unless we had the support of Russia and Poland we could do nothing to prevent such a development. If those countries would help, then we should join them in resisting Germany. If not, the only feasible plan was to get the support of Greece and Turkey: and of these, only Turkey would be much use as an ally, while Greece would probably be better as a benevolent neutral. In these circumstances what the Cabinet decided was to approach France, the U.S.S.R., Poland, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece and Roumania and to follow this, if those countries responded satisfactorily, by a public declaration of resistance to any act of

German aggression aimed at dominating south and east Europe.⁽¹⁴⁾

This decision did not hold good for long. Only the next day—19th March—Mr. Chamberlain put a new plan to a few Ministers, including Lord Halifax.⁽¹⁵⁾ In doing this Mr. Chamberlain was influenced by the reactions in the various capitals to a request for their views which had been sent at the time when German action against Roumania seemed imminent. Although definite replies had not been received from anyone except Russia and Turkey by the time the Prime Minister formulated his new plan, it was already clear that none of the smaller states were likely to commit themselves in the absence of a lead from the West and without first consulting each other. The Soviet Union had suggested a conference of themselves, Britain, France, Poland, Roumania and Turkey to discuss common action, and France was ready to collaborate with us apparently irrespective of what the others might do. But the Prime Minister had not yet reached that point. What he suggested was a formal declaration of resistance to aggression to be made by Britain, France, Russia and Poland but extending the area to be protected to the whole of Europe.⁽¹⁶⁾

On 20th March Lord Halifax commended this plan to the Cabinet as the best way of achieving a positive result in the near future. A declaration of such political significance, he argued, would have a steadying effect and could be followed by approaches to the smaller states and by a study of the particular problem of Roumania. And not being limited to south east Europe, it was possible that Poland would realise it was in her interests to resist German aggression even in the West. The Prime Minister told his colleagues of his conviction that nothing else would suffice. While we would not pledge ourselves in the declaration to more than consultation, the implication was clear and public opinion would undoubtedly expect consultation to be followed by action. And he was quite specific about what that action must be: 'If Germany showed signs that she intended to proceed with her march for world domination, we must take steps to stop her by attacking her on two fronts. We should attack Germany, not in order to save a particular victim, but in order to pull down the bully.' Nevertheless he made it clear that he was not necessarily thinking of a guarantee of existing frontiers or the indefinite maintenance of the *status quo*. The key here would be what would constitute a threat to the political independence of European states, and the Cabinet as a whole did not assume that German action against Danzig would necessarily be such a threat. After the meeting the draft was tightened up by the Prime Minister and Lord Halifax to meet the concern of the French Ambassador (he was speaking personally) to avoid the impression that all we were going to do was to talk. In its final form, therefore, the draft provided for

consultation between the Four Powers in the immediate future, i.e. to decide what to do to resist aggression before it had actually taken place.⁽¹⁷⁾

It soon became clear that the Four-Power Declaration was also unlikely to get beyond the discussion stage and that we would have to think again. True, the French Government welcomed the idea without reserve and the Soviet Government agreed to add its signature as soon as France and Poland had promised theirs. But the Poles, although they had not yet formally replied, were exceedingly apprehensive of aligning themselves with the U.S.S.R. against Germany.⁽¹⁸⁾ Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Halifax therefore took advantage of M. Bonnet's presence in London on 21st-23rd March for the French President's state visit to discuss the next step. It was now that the idea of a bilateral guarantee was born. Bonnet was adamant about the vital need to bring Poland in somehow, even by threats, and disclosed that in reaffirming the Franco-Polish Treaty Colonel Beck had left a loophole in the event of France attacking Germany in reply to German aggression elsewhere. Because they thought it likely that Poland would find it easier to say what she would do in the specific event of a German attack on Roumania, the Ministers taking part in these talks decided to tell the Polish Government that the Western Powers would go to Roumania's support if Poland did so too. We must of course satisfy ourselves that Roumania really would resist, and having reached an understanding with Poland in this respect would then suggest to her and to Roumania that it might be in the interest of both of them to secure Soviet participation. No one questioned the Prime Minister's assumption that we must apply all this to a Hungarian attack on Roumania as well, since Germany might well disguise her own aggression in this way. Nor was there any discussion of Lord Halifax's remark that Poland would no doubt expect the West to do as much for her as for Roumania.⁽¹⁹⁾ Ministers agreed to do nothing till Poland's formal reply about the Four Power Declaration had been received. When it came on 24th March it suggested, instead, a secret understanding *in the same sense* between Britain and Poland. France's Treaty with Poland contained a consultative clause, and the Polish Government did not think it necessary to include her in the new arrangements.⁽²⁰⁾

In London it was considered that the Polish proposal would lack the same deterrent effect on Germany as a public declaration. And there were further difficulties. The British Chargé d'Affaires in Berlin was exceedingly worried at the bad effect the reports of our projected new policy were already having on the German public of all classes and political opinion, to whom it was inevitably represented as encirclement. And a similar anxiety was reflected in reports

from Rome attributing to this new policy the recent reaffirmation of the Axis by the Fascist Grand Council.⁽²¹⁾ Mr. Chamberlain himself was very conscious of this difficulty and had already tried to refute charges of encirclement by emphasising in the House, on 23rd March, that he had no desire to stand in the way of Germany's legitimate expansion nor was he trying to organise opposing blocks of countries. He was conscious too that, with the attempt to engage other countries together with Britain in opposition to aggression, the perils of an error of judgment were much enhanced. He shared Poland's profound distrust of Russia, whose ability to maintain an offensive he doubted, even if she wanted to, and feared that too much insistence on associating her with our arrangements would cost us the sympathy of those who might be more effective allies.^{(22)*} Nevertheless the Poles' suggested alternative did not meet with his agreement and was not allowed to influence the course of Anglo-French policy. Indeed our next step showed that, with French approval, we were now going further than had in so many words been agreed with M. Bonnet in London, in that we now definitely related our offer of a bilateral guarantee to a German attack on Poland and did not confine it to one on Roumania alone.

After a meeting of the F.P.C. on the 27th and of the Cabinet on the 29th, the Polish and Roumanian Governments were informed that if either of them was prepared actively to resist a German threat to its independence, either by direct or indirect military attack or by processes of economic penetration or national political disintegration, Britain and France would go to its aid. This offer was dependent on Poland going to the help of Roumania as well, and would be part of a reciprocal arrangement with Poland whereby Britain and France would have her support if they were attacked by Germany or went to war with her to resist her aggression anywhere in western Europe or Yugoslavia. At a convenient moment we intended to tell the

* In a long letter to his sisters, dated 26th March 1939, Chamberlain summed up the position so far.

'The only line of advance that presented itself to me after the Czecho-Slovakian affair was to get a declaration signed by the four Powers, Britain, France, Russia and Poland, that they would act together in the event of further signs of German aggressive ambitions.' He says Poland would not face this for fear of openly antagonising Germany and he understands her view. 'Was it worth while to go on with Russia in that case? I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia. I have no belief whatever in her ability to maintain an effective offensive even if she wanted to. And I distrust her motives, which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty and to be concerned only with getting everyone else by the ears. Moreover, she is both hated and suspected by many of the smaller states notably by Poland, Roumania and Finland so that our close association with her might easily cost us the sympathy of those who would much more effectively help us if we can get them on our side.'

My conclusion, therefore, is that the Declaration is dead and I am now exploring another possibility. Roumania would appear to be the next course on the German menu. If she were prepared to fight we might get Poland to agree to come to her assistance, for Poland would be terribly weakened if Roumania were in German hands. And I would be prepared to join with France in resistance to anything of this kind.'

Soviet Government what was going on, with the explanation that, in the first instance, we were negotiating with the two countries thought most likely to be menaced by Germany. We hoped for at least her benevolent neutrality and perhaps the supply of war material to the two threatened countries for which, however suspicious they might be of Soviet motives, they might indeed be grateful in an emergency. If we could thus consolidate the position of Poland and Roumania, we could then more easily rally Turkey and Greece to the common cause. But we were not now thinking of approaching the Yugoslavs in the same sense owing, as Lord Halifax told their Chargé d'Affaires, to their particularly delicate position between Germany and Italy.

The Cabinet and the F.P.C. discussions had been much concerned with the proposed exclusion of Russia about which some Ministers, in particular the Home Secretary, were far from happy and were also puzzled that France had not so far been more definite about her ally. Lord Halifax agreed with Mr. Chamberlain that, since suspicion of Russia in so many countries might well jeopardise the organisation of a common front against aggression, we must risk the trouble which, it was anticipated, her exclusion from such a front would arouse in the Opposition in Parliament. The Foreign Secretary undertook to do his utmost to keep Russia from taking offence, and the Prime Minister mentioned to the F.P.C. a possible secret agreement between ourselves and Russia whereby she, also, would promise to support Poland and Roumania. The Chiefs of Staff had not so far been given the opportunity to state anything more than their very provisional views about Roumania, and the military implications of these new moves were not discussed at this meeting except that reference was made to the importance of a two-front war against Germany (in which Lord Halifax showed that he shared Mr. Chamberlain's views that Russia would not be of great military value), with France and ourselves holding the Maginot line. The only other new point that emerged—and an important one—was the Prime Minister's remark to the F.P.C. that, even if Poland would not reciprocate in the event of an attack in the West or on Yugoslavia, we must give her a unilateral assurance about the eastern front. The F.P.C. recorded no reaction to this and the Cabinet did not refer to it at all. It turned out to be the next step.⁽²³⁾

On the morning of 30th March a Cabinet meeting was specifically summoned to discuss a unilateral guarantee to Poland before any other arrangements were completed. This had been precipitated by information from the American Ambassador in London and, in more detail, from the Berlin correspondent of *The News Chronicle*, then under sentence of expulsion from Germany, that Poland was the next item on the Nazi programme. The press correspondent

reinforced his information by quoting our Military Attaché in Berlin, Colonel Mason-Macfarlane, as saying he would be glad to see us at war with Germany in the next three months for otherwise Poland would have ceased to exist. The Attaché's despatch when it was received was not quite as specific about Germany's next target: what it did specifically advocate, however, was war with Germany almost at once, before she had had time fully to benefit from her absorption of Czechoslovakia. It is hardly surprising that one of the Attaché's civilian colleagues described him as being in a 'very warlike mood'. This was the only evidence of German intentions offered to the Cabinet and was surely correctly described by Lord Halifax as 'necessarily uncertain'.⁽²⁴⁾* But perhaps it is a measure of the existing tension that both he and the Prime Minister thought it certain enough to merit such a drastic step as they were now proposing, even though for the moment all they wanted was the approval of a draft ready for immediate publication should the situation require it. And the Cabinet themselves went further still. They decided, if the French agreed, on an immediate announcement, and delegated to the F.P.C. the drafting of its terms. In reaching their decisions the Cabinet hardly mentioned the Dominions,⁽²⁶⁾ but did hear from the Prime Minister that the Opposition in Parliament had given its general concurrence to what was now planned. Nor did they discuss in any detail the exact circumstances in which we should go to Poland's aid. There was some anxiety lest, by precipitate action, we actually encouraged her to go to war over Danzig; but Lord Halifax thought Colonel Beck would avoid this if he could. Both Lord Halifax and Mr. Chamberlain, however, (though this was not specifically stated either in the announcement or privately to the Poles) were now quite definite that, in their view, if the Poles came to regard the Danzig issue as a threat to their independence, we would have to help them.

The Cabinet now took into consideration the views of the Chiefs of Staff as summarised for them during the meeting on 30th March by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence.† The Chiefs of Staff made it clear that, so far as they were concerned, their current appreciation dealt only with the extent to which a guarantee by

* A C.O.S. report received during the Cabinet Meeting and attached to the minutes showed no evidence of an impending major move against Poland, and a summary of captured documents shows that Hitler was in fact still going slow. On 21st March Herr von Ribbentrop resumed negotiations with the Polish Ambassador in a tone showing impatience, but it is clear that while the Poles were to be pressed hard on the same basis as before (i.e. Danzig and an extra-territorial road and railway to East Prussia) Hitler was still thinking in terms of a peaceful settlement if he could get it, and one which would bind Poland more closely to Germany, rather than using force which would probably drive Poland into the arms of Britain.⁽²⁵⁾

† On 28th March the Minister had asked for a report from the Chiefs of Staff 'as a matter of great urgency', on the implication of a military guarantee to Roumania and Poland.⁽²⁷⁾

France and Britain to Poland and Roumania altered the situation envisaged in their major European Appreciation.^{(28)*} They also observed that, if all four powers mentioned were involved in such an arrangement on a basis of equality, then vital decisions about national security had been 'surrendered . . . to the action of other governments over whom we have no control, at a time when our defence programme is far from complete,' although they did qualify this by assuming that we would go to Poland's help only if she resisted an attack and not if she herself committed an unprovoked act of war without first consulting us.

On this basis the Chiefs of Staff reached the conclusion that if we had to fight Germany it was better to do so with Poland as an ally rather than allow her to be absorbed. They said this fully realising we could do nothing to prevent Poland being overrun, but pointed out the obvious advantages of a two-front war, such as the drawing off of troops from the West if Germany concentrated her attack in that direction, and the need for considerable occupation forces if Germany first concentrated on the East and Poland was then overrun. In more detail, the Chiefs of Staff foresaw the addition of Poland and Roumania to our allies as making no difference from the naval point of view and little in the air. Assuming Germany did not at first deal an all-out blow to Poland before turning West, she would have to keep perhaps as much as 20 per cent of her first-line fighter strength in eastern Germany to meet the threat of Poland's 'reasonably efficient' force of 230 bombers. But this threat could not be long sustained unless the U.S.S.R. supplied men and machines, and would probably not appreciably reduce the scale of attack which Germany could bring upon the West. If Germany concentrated first upon Poland, her air attack in the West would, of course, be temporarily reduced, and the greater dispersal of her fighter and anti-aircraft defence would reduce her resistance to Allied attack. But it was on land that the addition of Poland and Roumania to our allies would chiefly be noticed. In an attack on Roumania and acting on the defensive elsewhere, Germany might perhaps use 20 divisions with 18-22 covering the Polish Front, thus keeping away from the West about 42 of her total of 105-110 divisions. For an offensive against Poland, and acting on the defensive elsewhere, Germany might use 40-45 divisions (as against Poland's total of about 54) with 15-17 on the Roumanian Front, thus tying up about 62 divisions. And even when she had conquered the East she would still require few, if any, less divisions there to guard against a Soviet threat. If Germany attacked in the West and remained on the defensive in the East she would probably keep in the East 24-30

* See above, Chapter XVII.

divisions and, allowing for a suitable reserve, attack with about 60, which would be enough to overrun Holland and perhaps part of Belgium but not enough to breach the Maginot Line. All in all, having regard to the internal situation in Germany, the strain of her rearmament programme and the dispersal of force a two-front war would entail, the C.O.S. looked with somewhat surprising confidence to the ultimate issue. Finally, although they stressed the importance of a proper co-ordination of plans with any new allies, they wanted staff talks with Poland or Roumania left mainly to the French who, they argued, had had considerable experience dealing with both countries.*

By the time the F.P.C. met to discuss the draft declaration later on 30th March, and again the next day, both France and Poland had agreed to an announcement although neither anticipated an immediate coup. The British Ambassador in Warsaw Sir Howard Kennard, however, was extremely anxious because the present state of feeling in Poland did not, in his opinion, exclude some impulsive action; he therefore suggested that our guarantee should relate only to unprovoked aggression by Germany. The F.P.C. decided against this because German methods were so insidious that Poland in certain circumstances might be forced in self-defence to a technical act of provocation; but Colonel Beck was asked to be particularly careful in his dealings with Germany. Finally, the F.P.C. decided not to link the declaration too much with prevailing rumours since further enquiries had failed to show that any specific German aggression was imminent; and the Cabinet, in giving its final approval at noon on 31st March, kept to this decision in spite of War Office information in the opposite sense.⁽³⁰⁾

That same afternoon, 31st March, Mr. Chamberlain made the announcement in the House of Commons. He began by saying he had no official confirmation of the rumours of aggression currently in circulation. He went on to emphasise Britain's constant advocacy of the free negotiation of differences between those concerned; we could see no justification for the substitution of this method by force or threats of force. Then came the vital part:

'As the House is aware, certain consultations are now proceeding with other Governments. In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before these consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves

* It is not clear in how much detail the report was made known to the Cabinet. The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence only gave a broad summary.⁽²⁹⁾

bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect. I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter as do His Majesty's Government.'⁽³¹⁾

In a private letter soon afterwards Chamberlain put the matter somewhat differently, saying that it was in fact Foreign Office reports and rumours which convinced him of an immediately impending swoop on Poland by Germany. 'We then and there decided' he wrote, 'that we should have to make some such declaration as that which I made yesterday . . . What we are concerned with is not the boundaries of States but attacks on their independence. And it is we who will judge whether their independence is threatened or not'.⁽³²⁾

Since the Prime Minister's Birmingham speech there had been more pressure on the Government during question time in the Commons and in two debates in the Lords. But the Commons did not debate the new announcement for some days and their immediate reaction was brief and largely about Russia. To this the Prime Minister replied that we were in consultation with the Soviet Government who, he had no doubt, fully understood and appreciated the principles upon which we had acted. M. Litvinoff, however, made it quite clear he had not understood or appreciated those principles. Nor would he be moved, by anything our Ambassador could say, from his intention to stand apart and free from commitments. The Poles—fulfilling our request for doing nothing provocative to Germany—soft-pedalled their enthusiasm but nonetheless were appreciative.⁽³³⁾ The German Press was cautious until Hitler spoke at Wilhelmshaven on the evening of 1st April in such terms that our Chargé d'Affaires warned the Foreign Office we were 'dealing with a maniac who is violently roused against Great Britain'. But Hitler did not at this stage take any overt decisive action such as, for instance, denouncing the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, the possibility of which had been much discussed in the German Press since Prague. That was to come later.⁽³⁴⁾

The day of the Parliamentary debate was also the day of Colonel Beck's arrival in London. At this point Sir Howard Kennard urged the Foreign Office to find out from the Polish Foreign Minister exactly what was happening in his negotiations with Germany. The Ambassador himself said that he had had confirmation from Colonel Beck of a rumour that each side had informed the other that an attack on Danzig would be regarded as a *casus belli*; but since the Polish Ambassador in London denied that negotiations were even taking place, confusion remained.⁽³⁵⁾ Beck himself also denied that negotiations had got any further than the preliminary stage and that there had been any written demands on his country. And, although

he had in fact told the German government that, while willing for friendly negotiations, he would oppose with force any attempt at a unilateral settlement, he seemed at some pains to minimise Danzig's potential danger, doubting whether Germany would in fact risk war with Poland over 'local matters of this kind'. His idea of a settlement remained a bilateral agreement guaranteeing a free Government and safeguarding Polish rights, and he was firm against any extra-territorial arrangements although ready to facilitate transit through Polish territory. For the rest, his visit to London did not quite take the form hoped for. At the start he made our guarantee to Poland reciprocal in the case of a direct attack on Britain, thus putting us in the same position as France, but this was the only concrete result. He was evasive about Polish action in the event of German indirect attack through neutral countries, ruling out Yugoslavia altogether and only undertaking to consider Switzerland and the Low Countries if and when a permanent agreement with us was reached. He shied away from any association with Russia, direct or indirect, and said Poland would stand aside from any arrangement Britain and France might make with her. And although willing to discuss with Roumania the extension of their existing obligations, he clearly feared that such a move might throw Hungary into the arms of Germany. All in all, his strong preference was for a bilateral arrangement with us rather than a general one. And nothing the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary could say would change his mind. The final communiqué, in announcing the transformation of our unilateral guarantee into a reciprocal arrangement and its enforcement in the interval before a definite agreement was drawn up, did, it is true, apply it to 'mutual assistance in the event of any threat direct or indirect, to the independence of either'. But the communiqué went on to recognise that the precise definition of the various ways in which the need for such aid would arise needed further examination; and it is quite clear from the records that Beck departed as far as ever from committing himself to anything except direct attack.⁽³⁶⁾

Once the terms of the guarantee were agreed upon and published its military implications were at last examined in detail, and along two lines. First with the French as part of the Anglo-French Staff talks; second, to some degree independently, with the Poles.

At a meeting of the British and French military delegations on 31st March the senior British representative asked the French to prepare a paper on the effect on the European theatre if Poland were fighting with France and ourselves as an ally.⁽³⁷⁾ This, it should be remembered, was at a time when the British Chiefs of Staff were anxious that military talks with the Poles should be conducted mainly by the French. The French produced their paper in late April.⁽³⁸⁾

In it they expressed two views which they held to throughout the summer of 1939. First, that while Poland's entry into a war on the side of the Allies cut at the roots of Germany by threatening a two-front war against her, and all the more so if Poland's example could persuade Roumania and perhaps other Balkan States to copy her, nonetheless Poland's participation could assume its full value only if it brought about the constitution in the East 'of a long, solid and durable front'. Second, that the provision of essential supplies for Poland by France and Britain would be 'difficult if not impossible' and that such supplies could be obtained only from Russia or neighbouring neutral states. The Poles should therefore be encouraged 'to utilise all the possibilities of supply which Russia can give them'.⁽³⁹⁾

A few days later a joint Anglo-French paper repeated these arguments but filled them out in greater detail. The addition of Poland and Roumania as allies would leave the naval situation unaffected. In the air—and unless Russia also intervened and was allowed to use Polish airfields—Poland's help would not be of much assistance in weakening the potential of the German bomber force. But if a solid land front could be established in the East then Germany would find it difficult to pick off her enemies one by one as she had done hitherto, her military strength would be divided, and she could be denied the economic resources which she needed to avoid the consequences of a blockade. The joint paper stressed, as its French predecessor had done, the importance of supplies from Russia whether that country was in the war or not, and underlined the point that Turkey's participation on our side would open up another supply line to the Balkans.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Meanwhile, the ground was being prepared for Anglo-Polish talks which, however little they were wanted by the Chiefs of Staff, were now unavoidable. The Joint Planning Sub-Committee was instructed to prepare a draft which, after C.O.S. consideration and approval, would become a directive for the British delegation.⁽⁴¹⁾ The talks took place during the last week of May,⁽⁴²⁾ although the report based on them was not discussed at a C.I.D. meeting until two months later, on 24th July.⁽⁴³⁾ The British representatives had gone to the talks with little enough to offer; they had been instructed to explain that we could afford nothing except indirect support to Poland and to ask what the Poles wanted within such limits. The latter, naturally, were disappointed, but apparently made the most of what they could get, asking for help with war materials and also financial aid.

So far as Poland's plans were concerned it appeared that the Poles were convinced that Germany would concentrate her attacks on Poland on the outbreak of war and would remain on the de-

fensive elsewhere. Unfortunately, the Poles did not link this conviction with any preparation for common action with possible allies in eastern Europe. They were suspicious of the Russians and did not want Russian troops on Polish soil. They had no common preparations with Roumania, since the Polish-Roumanian alliance operated only, in practice, in the contingency of a Russian attack. And the Poles, unlike the British, were persuaded that Hungary would neither join the Germans nor agree to allow German troops across Hungarian territory. The Poles expected enormous initial losses from a German attack and had no intention of trying to hold their western frontier; their plan was to withdraw to a shorter line of rivers and lakes, somewhat east of the old German-Russian frontier. Nonetheless they did not expect complete defeat.

British comments on these plans were not altogether flattering. The British delegation considered that the Poles overrated their own strength and underrated that of Germany, with the result that they were too optimistic about their ability to resist a German advance. Moreover, the Poles had not seriously considered what action they might take should Germany attack first in the West except to estimate that, in such circumstances, the latter would need to leave about 40 divisions in the East for defensive purposes—a forecast which was described as ‘another instance of under-estimation of the German and over-estimation of their own forces’. Air action by France and Britain was regarded as unlikely ‘to do more than attract a few machines from the East,’ while the Polish plan to concentrate their bombers on the land battle was thought by the British to be far less promising than attacks on, for example, German oil reserves at Stettin. This last, however, should not be taken to imply that the British now rejected the earlier agreed policy of restricted bombing. Indeed, they regarded it as essential that there should be agreement with the Poles as to air objectives, similar to that already reached with the French, mostly on the ground that it would ‘be disastrous if the Poles had attacked Berlin before Germany had shown her hand’. That problem was discussed again a little later. Finally, although little had been achieved so far, and probably because of that, the Chiefs of Staff urged that the talks should be renewed—if possible with French representation—but at a higher level. It appeared that the Poles, like the Turks, ‘were somewhat reluctant to discuss military matters with officers of comparatively junior rank’ who had so far formed the British delegation. On that note General Ironside left, on 19th July, for further discussions in Warsaw which, in fact, produced no additional results before war began.

Meanwhile, further talks of some importance about military co-operation with Poland were going on between Britain and France. It seems that the British Chiefs of Staff were unhappy about the

almost complete lack of direct assistance likely to be given by the Western powers to Poland should the latter be subjected to Germany's main attack, partly because of the threat to Poland herself and partly because they considered it essential to 'subject Germany as far as possible to the full burden of a two-front war'.⁽⁴⁴⁾ They, therefore, asked the French for more information on what they, the French, thought the most likely ways in which we could help Poland in the opening phase of a major war. The French reply was not encouraging. It now seemed, from some reports, that they contemplated undertaking their main offensive, initially, in the Mediterranean area against Italy, although there might be diversions against the Siegfried line if the Germans themselves concentrated against Poland. It also appeared that the French were not too impressed with the value of the Poles as allies; they suggested no objectives for a Polish offensive, but were anxious only that the Poles 'should not be too ambitious and that there should be no question of trying to reach Berlin in a day'. One of the main conclusions the French reached was that—

'From the point of view of the coalition, it will always be a question, whether in the West or in the East, of organising at the outset long and solid fronts facing Germany, which will compel the enemy to deploy the greatest possible number of his forces. From these fronts operations against Germany will be launched. The form, the extent and the date of these operations cannot be determined *a priori*.'

On which the Chiefs of Staff commented that 'so far, therefore, our contacts with the French have not produced the answer to the problem as to how we and they can co-operate effectively in reducing the pressure on Poland if she is attacked'. And although the Chiefs of Staff admitted that this was unsatisfactory, since some assistance must be given to Poland, the only thing they could suggest was air action against Germany—only to go on to weaken their own suggestion by making such air action dependent on prior deployment of our own air defences, an advanced state of our own mobilisation and, if possible, action by the enemy which would justify our own bombing of something more profitable than purely military objectives.

Nonetheless, the dilemma of a choice between no help at all and help which challenged the by now firmly accepted policy of restricted bombing had been posed. 'In our view' wrote the Chiefs of Staff,

'we should find difficulty in justifying inaction in the air against Germany, however temporary it might be, while Poland was being overrun, even though the alternative of taking action . . . might well lead to indiscriminate air attacks by Germany on us.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

On 22nd June the C.I.D. discussed this report, although without any definite conclusion, and the Chiefs of Staff were asked to think again, particularly with reference to the problem of a neutral or hostile Italy.⁽⁴⁶⁾ It was obvious that the Ministers disliked the new suggestion of bombing Germany. In their reply to the C.I.D. the Chiefs of Staff appeared, at first sight, to be holding firm to their new view about an air offensive.⁽⁴⁷⁾ They did not consider that an attack on Italy would help Poland, nor did they believe that useful and immediate results could be gained from air operations unless enemy war industry was attacked with the risk of unrestricted response. The only way in which Poland could be helped was by 'immediate and direct action against Germany' and by implication, or so it seemed, such action was possible only by air operations. Indeed the Chiefs of Staff were explicit. Only by 'taking the gloves off' from the start could genuine help be given to Poland.

This did not mean, however, that the Chiefs of Staff now accepted the conclusion to which their own arguments, so far, inevitably led, since they also pointed out that to 'take the gloves off' in bombing would go clean against declarations already made, and would almost certainly involve German retaliation against London in the absence of any agreed definition of what constituted legitimate military objectives. They were clearly not happy about the apparently fruitless results of their further enquiries, and were anxious that both the French and the Poles should be consulted so that arguments might be examined and an ultimate decision, if it became necessary, be facilitated. But it was significant that the Poles were to be involved in this process so that 'no impetuous action on their part gives Germany an excuse for indiscriminate retaliation against them or us'.⁽⁴⁸⁾

In fact, Britain and France kept to their agreement to restrict bombing at the outset of war. On 28th August the Joint Planning Committee recommended that bombing be restricted to warships and that only at sea.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Direct help to Poland was not to be given. Her independence was more likely to be assured as the outcome of liberation at the end of a long war rather than by preventing her from being overrun at the beginning of it.

2. *The British and French Guarantees to Greece and Roumania. 13th April 1939*

On 7th April 1939 Italian forces invaded Albania. Since the third week in March there had been rumours of such a move but the British Government seems to have paid little attention to them. It is true that, as the rumours persisted, the British Ambassador in Rome

had warned Ciano that nothing would do more harm to the Anglo-Italian Agreement. Mr. Chamberlain, speaking in the House of Commons on the 6th April, was still vague about the danger of, and possible British responses to, a crisis; and Lord Perth, who had been instructed to remind Ciano again of the terms of the Agreement and to point out that in giving Italy a virtual mandate over Albania the League had also recognised the latter's independence and integrity, was not able to do so before the invasion had begun. Ciano then represented the Italian action as the result of an Albanian revolt against the present régime and denied that the Mediterranean *status quo* was in any way affected.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Mussolini, too, took the same line in a formal assurance, delivered in London by his Chargé d'Affaires on the evening of the 7th April, that 'the solution of the Italo-Albanian question will take place in such a form as not to provoke a crisis in Anglo-Italian relations or the international situation in general'. Lord Halifax received this with some reserve.⁽⁵¹⁾

In these circumstances, and with the Prime Minister away in Scotland, there was an emergency meeting of Ministers on the morning of 8th April. From the start, a different reaction from that to the seizure of Prague was perceptible. While the need for agreement with Greece and Turkey had admittedly been brought into greater prominence, it was clear that Ministers were anxious not to jeopardise our relations with Mussolini. The exact state of affairs in Albania was still obscure, and the Foreign Secretary hoped that in a few days the Italian Government might make some arrangement, for example by leaving Albanian sovereignty and frontiers unimpaired, which might be taken as within the letter of the Anglo-Italian Agreement;* and he felt, too, that we could not take a more forward line than the Yugoslavs who certainly, for the moment, seemed to have no intention of doing anything. The whole trend of the meeting is summed up in a remark by Sir John Simon:—'It seemed clear that the present juncture did not justify us in taking steps which would result in a European war. It was, however, necessary that we should so conduct ourselves that we should not appear to condone aggression while, at the same time, we should not indulge in such strong rebukes as to make ourselves appear in a weak position.' All that was decided was to recall to Malta a number of British warships visiting Italian ports, and to inform the Italian Government of our deep concern at its action and ask for the fullest and frankest explanation.⁽⁵³⁾ On that same day the Albanian Government appealed to Britain for at least moral support.⁽⁵⁴⁾ And the same evening the Italian Chargé d'Affaires, at his own urgent

* The Prime Minister hoped the same.⁽⁵²⁾

request, was received by Lord Halifax to deliver another message from Mussolini.

The Chargé d'Affaires reiterated that the Anglo-Italian Agreement was not prejudiced, and anticipated the complete occupation of Albania 'with full consent and welcome' of the people in a few days. Signor Crolla himself was worried lest we should denounce the Agreement but Lord Halifax, although not suggesting that this was likely, did say that the maintenance of Albania's political status was vital to the Agreement and that any change in it would be difficult to reconcile with Italian assurances. Further, and after Crolla himself had raised the subject, Halifax said the promotion of good relations would be greatly helped if Italian pledges of withdrawal from Spain were fulfilled. The next morning Crolla was back again to say that the future status of Albania would conform to 'the juridical tradition of Rome', to promise the withdrawal from Spain as soon as a victory parade had been held, and to stress that a crisis in Anglo-Italian relations would be deplorable. In reply Lord Halifax referred to Greek fears—of which he had been made aware the same morning—of an Italian occupation of Corfu. He spoke very plainly indeed of the importance of avoiding misunderstanding in Rome of what the British reaction to such a further move would be and, after Crolla had given his personal assurance that nothing of this kind was contemplated, urged the latter to leave his Government in no doubt that we would be most gravely concerned. Even so, Halifax ended up by saying that Britain would do everything possible to assist the maintenance of good relations with Italy.

That same evening Crolla delivered yet another message from Mussolini. This confirmed the intention to withdraw Italian troops from Spain after the victory parade, and repeated that assurances in the most absolute terms were to be given to the Greek Government (this was in fact done the following morning) that the rumours of hostile Italian intentions were false and that Italy would respect the territorial integrity of Greece. Lord Halifax expressed his appreciation for such a prompt reply and asked to be allowed to publish the promises. When, as a return, Crolla, speaking only personally, asked for an undertaking that the Anglo-Italian Agreement would remain in force, Lord Halifax was more definite than before. The British Government, he said, attached importance to the Agreement and was maintaining it in the face of opposition. Nothing was further from our thoughts than to do anything to impede the cause of peace; and to say that the occupation of Albania appeared difficult to reconcile with the *status quo* terms of the Agreement, was different from saying that we did not want, for indeed we intended, to exert every effort to collaborate for peace.⁽⁵⁵⁾ To complete the events of the day, the French Government agreed to

co-operate with us in supporting Greece if Italian assurances were not honoured.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Against this background the Prime Minister presided over a Cabinet meeting on the morning of 10th April. Lord Halifax, though now of the view that we should define our attitude to Greece and Turkey without awaiting a final settlement with Poland and Roumania, was still cautious. He thought it important not to act, because of events in Albania where Italy's interests had for so long been recognised, in such a way as to drive her to greater reliance on Germany. Several of his colleagues took the view that it was more important to concentrate on the German menace than on the Italian, and that the threat to Roumania was of much greater urgency than that to Greece or to Turkey. The discussion was then handed back to the F.P.C. But since there were still serious doubts about Italy's future actions the Cabinet authorised the return to Egypt from Palestine of two infantry battalions, one armoured car regiment and one artillery battery, in spite of the concern of the High Commissioner and the G.O.C. in Palestine at their withdrawal just when the Government's new Palestine policy was to be announced. In addition it was decided to authorise the assembly of the Mediterranean Fleet at Malta and the move thence to Alexandria of two cruisers and one division of destroyers.⁽⁵⁷⁾ In their turn, the French Cabinet had decided to bring the greater part of their Atlantic Fleet into the Mediterranean, to reinforce Tunis and French Somaliland, and to send in the direction of Italy the greater part of their military aviation.⁽⁵⁸⁾

Before the F.P.C. met on the afternoon of 10th April Mussolini had agreed that his promises could be made public, and the Roumanians had now asked us for a declaration in their support before their current negotiations with Poland were completed. The Prime Minister was thinking in terms of an ultimate unilateral guarantee to Roumania but nonetheless still wanted to await further evidence of Polish intentions; so too did the Committee as a whole, in spite of pressure by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence for a decision now. The discussion therefore centred on Greece and Turkey. Yugoslavia was left out as unlikely to be attacked. Of the three alternatives presented by the Foreign Office—a declaration that we would regard aggression against these two as an 'unfriendly act', a pact with both, or a general arrangement with the Mediterranean Powers to protect the *status quo*—it was the first the F.P.C. initially favoured. But at the suggestion of the President of the Board of Trade Ministers thought that different treatment should be accorded to the different countries concerned. For Greece, a unilateral declaration; with Turkey a bilateral and reciprocal arrangement to which end diplomatic talks should be instigated

forthwith.⁽⁵⁹⁾ By the next day it was clear this would not do. The Turks had shown much disappointment when told of what we had said to Italy about Corfu, and both the British Ambassador in Ankara and his French colleague were agreed that a categorical statement of where we stood was needed. And to point this still further the Foreign Office discovered that the Turko-Greek Treaty was not one of mutual aid but of benevolent neutrality unless the attack came from a Balkan power. In these circumstances the F.P.C. reaffirmed their recommendation of a definite assurance to Greece of all the support in our power if her independence was threatened and if she resisted. And they decided to ask the Turkish Government if, in view of this assurance, they would extend their obligations to Greece to cover an attack by Italy. An approach to the Turks for a bilateral arrangement was also put in train after the Committee had heard of the importance attached by the S.A.C. to the formation of a Balkan bloc, including Bulgaria, to which Turkey was the key. The French were to be asked to co-operate with us, in which case the guarantee to Greece would be announced without awaiting a reply from Turkey.⁽⁶⁰⁾

This last is what ultimately happened, though not without a last-minute change of plan. The Turks refused to commit themselves without a more definite guarantee of their own security. The French agreed without hesitation, but said they were convinced of the vital need for an immediate announcement about Roumania as well. Greece, too, was not very happy and wanted to avoid any impression that the guarantee had been pre-arranged with her.⁽⁶¹⁾ In these circumstances the Cabinet agreed that we must avoid a split with France and decided to announce unilateral guarantees to Greece and Roumania. And Ministers agreed with Mr. Chamberlain that, in dealing with the actual invasion of Albania, he should take the line that while we would be quite justified in denouncing the Anglo-Italian Agreement we were not going to do so; they also thought that we should draw attention to Mussolini's assurance about Spain, since their action in this respect would be the ultimate test of whether the Italians intended to abide by the Agreement or not.^{(62)*}

On the afternoon of 13th April Mr. Chamberlain made his announcement in the House of Commons. He gave an account of the events to date, of our representations to Italy and of Mussolini's assurance to Greece. The background to the invasion was, it was argued, still obscure in the absence of information from the British

* Although Mr. Chamberlain was still anxious not to make things worse with Italy, his private papers show that at this point he no longer had much hope. The Albanian episode, he wrote, had blocked 'any chance of further rapprochement with Italy . . . just as Hitler has blocked any German rapprochement'. And again, writing of Mussolini's many personal assurances; 'I am afraid that such faith as I ever had in the assurances of dictators is rapidly being whittled away'.⁽⁶³⁾

Minister in Albania, but Mr. Chamberlain thought enough was known to make it apparent that a powerful nation had imposed its will on a small one by a show of force and in a manner difficult in the extreme to reconcile with the maintenance of the *status quo* provided for in the Anglo-Italian Agreement.⁽⁶⁴⁾* He then described the rumours of impending Italian action against Corfu as an illustration of the general uneasiness now prevailing. The result of all this was that the British Government had both a duty and a service to perform by leaving no doubt of its own position. 'I therefore take this opportunity of saying on their behalf that His Majesty's Government attach the greatest importance to the avoidance of disturbance by force or threats of force of the *status quo* in the Mediterranean and the Balkan Peninsula. Consequently, they have come to the conclusion that, in the event of any action being taken which clearly threatened the independence of Greece or Roumania, and which the Greek and Roumanian Governments respectively considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Greek or Roumanian Government, as the case might be, all the support in their power.' He then referred to Turkey 'whose close relations with the Greek Government are known' and to whom we were communicating our declaration, and then said that the British Government had no intention of denouncing the Anglo-Italian Agreement because no responsible person could lightly do a thing likely only to increase international tension. He then passed on to Mussolini's assurance about Spain, 'a vital element in the Agreement', and ended with a call for stiffened resolution to make Britain herself strong in her own defence and able to play her part in aiding others to resist aggression.⁽⁶⁵⁾†

In the debate that followed the Government's fears of pressure to denounce the Anglo-Italian Agreement were not realised and in this respect they were let off lightly. Of the two principal Labour spokesmen, Mr. Attlee made no specific demand about it and Mr. Dalton was clearly thinking only in terms of temporary suspension till there was better evidence of good faith on Italy's part. For the rest the criticism—and it came from both sides of the House—was not for the most part against the policy of guarantees but against the

* News from the British Minister in Albania had to date been exceedingly scanty. It was not until some days after the Prime Minister's statement that much detail was received from him and even then exact information was lacking. The Minister, however, felt sure enough of what had happened to express his strong conviction that there was nothing in the condition of the country, or of Italian nationals there, or in relations between Italy and Albania to justify the invasion. He was convinced that it was a plot dating from January, if not earlier, to destroy the King and deliberately engineer a situation of which to take advantage.

† In Paris M. Daladier made his announcement the same afternoon and also took the opportunity to confirm the French alliance with Poland.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Government for not showing sufficient vigour both in strengthening ourselves at home and in rallying the forces of peace abroad. And there was even greater pressure than before about including Russia in the new system of guarantees. The debate was wound up by Sir John Simon who defended the Government from charges of dawdling and hesitation, re-emphasised the momentous changes of policy which had now taken place and, in refuting any intention of ignoring Russia, explained how Moscow had been kept informed of what was going on.^{(67)*}

It is important to emphasise that these new guarantees were almost entirely political in scope and in immediate purpose. There was no detailed analysis of their military implications during preliminary discussions, and no follow up Staff talks once the guarantees had been given. Implicit in the guarantees, however, was the wish to develop an east European and Balkan front—at any rate in the long run. And the key countries in such a plan were Russia and Turkey; so far no arrangement, let alone an understanding, had been reached with either. More will be said about negotiations with Russia in the next chapter.

Quite early on in the Staff talks between the British and French both sides made it clear how much importance they attached to Turkey, whether as a neutral or, preferably, as an ally.⁽⁷⁰⁾ The active co-operation of Turkey would, broadly speaking, be valuable in two ways. First, from the political point of view it could well affect the behaviour of Roumania, Bulgaria and Greece; the first and third might then be persuaded to intervene in war on the side of the Allies; the second, Bulgaria, might in this way be persuaded to remain neutral.⁽⁷¹⁾ Second, there would be a number of important military advantages. With Turkey on our side, and provided we had control of the eastern Mediterranean, another supply route to the Balkans and eastern Europe would become available, a matter much in the minds of the Chiefs of Staff when they were discussing the difficulty of getting supplies to Poland.⁽⁷²⁾ Again, Turkey could stop Italy's Black Sea trade and thus tighten the economic stranglehold on her. She could help us to isolate and perhaps capture the Dodecanese and strengthen our control of the Aegean. Her help would also buttress the French position in the Levant.⁽⁷³⁾

In late June a brief discussion in the C.I.D. made it clear that Turkey was rated high on the list of countries who needed (and were demanding) supplies and financial help from Britain and the matter was referred urgently to the Cabinet.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Shortly afterwards a

* Lord Halifax made a similar declaration in the House of Lords the same afternoon in a debate covering much the same ground.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Since the declaration about Poland, Lord Halifax had in fact seen M. Maisky twice, once about the Beck visit and once for a general discussion which included our policy arising from Italian action against Albania.⁽⁶⁹⁾

British military delegation went to Ankara and reported back to the C.I.D. in mid-July.⁽⁷⁵⁾ This series of talks was not very productive. On the naval side, it is true, the defences of the Dardanelles were reported to be in good shape; and the Turks had promised that their airfields could be used by British aircraft if necessary. But, so far as army matters were concerned, the Turkish General Staff were unwilling to disclose their dispositions in war and to discuss co-ordinated plans until Britain proved more forthcoming with supplies, and until an Anglo-Turkish treaty had been signed together with a military convention. Supplies of naval equipment, fighters, bombers and anti-aircraft guns were, in fact, on the way. The other demands were more difficult; apart from anything else they involved consultation with the French. By a military convention the Turks meant a convention of the kind which had been drawn up by members of the Balkan Entente, namely, an agreement as to the precise strength of the forces which each of the contracting parties would provide in the event of war. The Cabinet in London, and the Chiefs of Staff, disliked being committed in this way, although the latter were reluctantly prepared to discuss the terms of a convention if the Turks insisted. In any case, such further discussions would need the presence of higher ranking officers than those who had talked with the Turks so far—this time the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East—and that step was not to be taken until a French delegation to Ankara had reported back and further consultation had taken place between the French and ourselves. And there was no significant advance beyond that before war broke out.

SOURCES

| | <i>Page</i> |
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| (2) Cab. Cons. 55(38) | 690 |
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| (8) <i>The Times</i> , particularly 4th and 13th March 1939. See also <i>History of The Times</i> (London, 1952), Vol. IV, Pt. II, pp. 945-60 | 692 |
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| (10) Neville Chamberlain, letters to his sisters, dated 12th, 19th and 26th February 1939 | 692 |
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- (24) Cab. Cons. 16(39); D.B.F.P. Third S., Vol. IV: Nos. 566, (*News Chronicle* telegram), 571 and 577 (U.S. information): Appendix V (The Military Attaché's despatch). It is clear from D.B.F.P. Third S. Vol. V: No. 51 that the Air Attaché did not agree with him. 699
- (25) See A. L. Bullock, *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny* (London, 1952) pp. 556-58 699
- (26) Such reference as there was to the Dominions is supplemented by information in Cab. Reg'd file 14/3/16, Pt. I and Cab. Reg'd file 14/12/7 (file destroyed), showing them on the whole to have been in support of the Government. 699
- (27) C.O.S. 870. This report, in its final form, became C.O.S. 872 699
- (28) D.P.(P)44 700
- (29) The conclusions reached by the C.O.S. were given in much greater detail in C.O.S. 872, a paper which was not circulated as a C.P., and which was not sent to the Foreign Office until 3rd April (see Cab. Reg'd. File 14/25/7) 701
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- (34) D.B.F.P. Third S., Vol. IV: Nos. 481, 594, 606. F.O. C.4727/15/18: (text of Hitler's speech). A. L. Bullock, *op. cit.*, pp. 458-60, points out that Hitler's violent reactions to the British guarantee led him to issue a directive on 3rd April to prepare for war with Poland (Operation WHITE) and the seizure of Danzig. Plans were to be ready for 1st September, the actual date of the invasion. 702
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- (37) A.F.C.(J) 5th Mtg. 703
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- (39) This paper was discussed at A.F.C.(J) 12th Mtg. on 26th April 704
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- (51) D.B.F.P. Third S., Vol. V: Nos. 81, 83 708
- (52) Neville Chamberlain, letter to his sisters, dated 9th April 1939 708
- (53) Cab. Cons. 18(39) Conference of Ministers, 8th April 1939 . 708
- (54) D.B.F.P. Third S., Vol. V: No. 94 708
- (55) Ibid.: Nos. 95, 101, 109-10 (Crolla/Halifax); 97, 105, 111-12, 117 (Greek fears); 118 (Italian assurance to Greece) . 709
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- (57) Cab. Cons. 19(39). In the discussion there was mention of C.O.S. 873(JP)1, a report drawn up in connection with the Staff talks with the French, which enlarged a little on the C.O.S. views about Greece and Turkey as allies expressed at the time of the Polish guarantee 710
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- (59) F.P.(36) 41st Mtg. 711
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- (63) Neville Chamberlain, letter to his sisters, 15th April 1939 . 711
- (64) For despatches from Durazzo giving details of events leading
up to Italian occupation of Albania, see D.B.F.P. Third S.,
Vol. V: Nos. 133, 159, 202 712
- (65) H.C. 5s, Vol. 346: 5-15 712
- (66) F.O. R.2992/2613/67 712
- (67) H. C. 5s, Vol. 346: 15-140 713
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- (69) See D.B.F.P. Third S. Vol. V: Nos. 19, 42 713
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- (73) A.F.C.(J) 88; see also D.P.(P)44, paras. 146-47 713
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- (75) D.P.(P)69 and C.I.D. 368th Mtg. 714

PART IV

CHAPTER XIX

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE
SOVIET UNION, 1939

1. *Initial Overtures: M. Litvinov's Proposals to the
Western Powers, April 1939*

THERE WAS considerable uneasiness among some British Ministers and in Parliament at the exclusion of Russia from the guarantee to Poland and the one to Roumania which followed on 13th April. As a result Ministers agreed among themselves to do everything possible to keep Russia friendly and unoffended. But something more was obviously needed; and, as yet, there had been little discussion of how best to include her in the new arrangements. From the outset of the negotiations that were soon to begin the British Government was up against a variety of problems. There was almost constant pressure to do something about Russia not only from the Opposition but from such Conservatives as Mr. Churchill and Mr. Eden, and it does indeed seem that there was an unprecedented degree of unanimity in the country as a whole on the need to build up what became known as a Peace Front which, to be fully effective, must include Russia. What there does not seem to have been in all this was any general agreement about the form our collaboration with her should take; and the pressure on the Government, which at times became heated, largely took the form of accusations of delay, incitements to greater efforts and demands for information rather than constructive suggestions.

Faced with this pressure the Government also had to consider the effect collaboration with Russia might have on other countries, and the suspicions of Russia harboured by Poland and the smaller states of eastern Europe. Further, in deciding that we must make an attempt to get on terms with Moscow because any agreement with Russia was better than none, Ministers were primarily influenced by the danger of a German-Soviet deal. This danger was repeatedly mentioned throughout the discussions of the F.P.C., but always as a possible result of our failure to reach agreement with Russia rather than as the outcome of a German initiative. Moreover, what was not apparently contemplated, and hence the shock when it happened,

was any very serious German-Soviet rapprochement while our own negotiations with Moscow were still in progress.

Mr. Chamberlain himself did not go by any means all the way with his colleagues. He had the gravest suspicion of the Soviet Union which increased rather than diminished as opinion hardened in favour of common action with that country. This is apparent again and again in the letters he wrote throughout the spring and summer of 1939. He feared that the open association of Britain and France with Russia would provoke Germany to further aggression: he feared the effect of such an association on other countries and not only on those we hoped to encourage to resistance: he doubted Russia's military capacity and he deeply suspected her motives. Above all, he disliked the lining-up of opposing blocs that an alliance with Russia would imply.*

In addition to this we were faced with a Soviet distrust of the West, and in particular of Britain, no less strong than Chamberlain's of Russia, and with a Soviet technique of negotiation which consisted in the submission of a rigid plan, carefully thought out and logically complete, ill according with our more accommodating methods which to the Russian mind were incomprehensible except on the supposition we were not in earnest. They demanded what they expected to receive.

Finally, and to make things worse, Britain started in a peculiarly weak negotiating position. Having already guaranteed Poland, our next move inevitably was to try to build a Peace Front in order to make that guarantee effective, and the Russian government had therefore good reason to assume that we would do much to avoid failure. We were, in fact, petitioners and, moreover, petitioners who had created a formidable obstacle by publicly committing ourselves to help a country which would not itself contemplate acceptance in advance of a similar commitment by Russia. However much we may have hoped the Russians would not press the point too far, it was surely too much to expect that they would not sooner or later demand a definite undertaking from Poland in return for their accession to an existing guarantee. When they did so it proved an insurmountable obstacle.

On 14th April 1939 M. Maisky, Soviet Ambassador in London, asked Lord Halifax in what ways the latter thought the Soviet Union could best help Roumania.⁽¹⁾ At about the same time there was evidence of the Soviet Union's concern for her other frontiers which was to become so difficult to deal with: we heard that M. Litvinov had told the Estonian and Latvian Governments that

* See above, p. 697 fn, for a private letter in this sense written on 26th March 1939; there are similar letters written on 9th and 24th April, 14th, 21st and 27th May, and on 2nd and 15th July 1939.

Russia would not remain a disinterested spectator of threats to their independence, whether they themselves were opposed to such threats or not.⁽²⁾ Meanwhile the British Government had thought of a somewhat cautious proposal. On the 13th Lord Halifax spoke to the Cabinet of asking the Soviet Government to make a unilateral declaration that while they, the latter, recognised the differences between themselves and other powers, they were ready to give their aid in whatever way was found convenient to any of their neighbours who were the victims of aggression *and wanted their help*.⁽³⁾ Virtually no discussion of this is recorded in the Cabinet minutes and it seems then to have been left in the air.

On 18th April M. Litvinov the head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Moscow submitted to the French and British Governments his own formal and far-reaching proposals, most of the essentials of which were to hold good for the Soviet position throughout the whole negotiations:

1. Britain, France and Russia to conclude a pact of mutual assistance, including help of a military nature, in the case of aggression in Europe against any one of them. The pact to be of 5-10 years' duration.
2. The three countries to undertake in case of aggression against them to give all manner of assistance, including military, to eastern European States between the Baltic and Black Seas and bordering the U.S.S.R.
3. The three countries to settle within the shortest time the extent and forms of military aid to be given in fulfilment of the first two items.
4. The British Government to regard a guarantee to Poland as concerned exclusively with aggression by Germany. This was necessary, M. Litvinov said, because the present declaration might be taken to imply possible Soviet aggression as well.
5. The present Polish-Roumanian Treaty to be declared operative in the case of aggression of any nature or else revoked altogether as one directed against the U.S.S.R. (This Treaty was a defensive alliance between the two countries formed in 1921 against the Russian threat.)
6. Britain, France and Russia to undertake, following the outbreak of war, not to enter into a separate peace without common consent.
7. An agreement to this effect to be signed simultaneously with the military convention provided for in item 3. M. Litvinov thought this necessary because previous experience had shown difficulties arose when military conventions were negotiated subsequently to political conventions.

8. Joint negotiations between Britain, France, the U.S.S.R. and Turkey for a special agreement on mutual aid. This was designed to cover the possibility that Turkey might want to confine her liabilities to the Balkan or Mediterranean areas.⁽⁴⁾

Thus, right at the beginning, the Russians had squarely stated what they wanted. The first instinct of the F.P.C. was to stick to our own plan of a unilateral declaration by the Soviet Government. In this the members of the Committee were influenced by arguments developed by the Foreign Office on lines very close to the views held by Mr. Chamberlain. Against the advantage of a paper commitment by Russia there had to be weighed the disadvantage of open association with her. The first was problematical since all available information showed Russia unlikely to be able, even if she wanted, to give effective assistance outside her frontiers, and as a potential source of war material her usefulness would also be limited. These disadvantages were plain, it was agreed, in the case of Poland and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Roumania, and other countries such as Portugal, Spain and Yugoslavia had also warned us that association with Russia would lose us much sympathy. Since what we were trying to do was to establish a Peace Front, the disadvantages were thought therefore to outweigh the advantages. The F.P.C. accordingly sent to the French for their approval a somewhat rambling refusal of the Russian proposals in which we criticised M. Litvinov's plan for not taking account of the practical difficulties and for needing a long time to negotiate even if these difficulties proved less formidable. Instead we would still prefer our own suggestion. This, we were careful to point out, did not commit the U.S.S.R. any more than Britain and France had already committed themselves; but, if the Soviet Government wished, its own declaration could be worded to make their intervention conditional on that of the West.^{(5)*}

The French replied on the 24th April. For much the same reasons as our own, they agreed that the Russian plan would not do but did not think ours met the case either. What was needed to avoid trouble with the lesser powers was a general formula but also one precise enough to apply to the most likely contingencies. What was needed to meet Soviet insistence on reciprocity—without which the French thought no agreement possible—was a formula whereby Britain and France guaranteed Russia against the consequences of the assistance asked of her. They therefore submitted their own plan for a tripartite pact:

* The Committee did not at this stage pay much attention to the Soviet inclusion of the Baltic States.⁽⁶⁾

1. Immediate Soviet help to France and Britain if those two were at war with Germany as a result of their engagements to prevent all changes by force of the *status quo* in central or eastern Europe.
2. Immediate French and British help to the Soviet if as a result of her help to them as above she was at war with Germany.
3. Immediate steps to concert the details of this assistance, in both cases, and plans to ensure its efficacy.^{(7)*}

The Cabinet and the F.P.C. united in their dislike of this plan, and Lord Halifax said he could not understand why the French thought it would not provoke just that trouble with Poland they were as anxious as we were to avoid. The result was a decision to press for our own proposal.^{(9)†} In reaching this decision Ministers did not act entirely on the strength of their own views. M. Gafencu, the Roumanian Foreign Minister, who visited London as part of a general tour of Europe, showed the same suspicions of Russia as did the Poles and was against any alignment with her against Germany or, for that matter, with Germany against Russia. But, while intimate collaboration should be avoided, Russia should not be cold-shouldered because, if war did break out, everybody would be glad of her help. M. Gafencu did not therefore like the French plan and undertook to say so when he reached Paris, but saw no objection to the type of declaration of which we were in favour.‡

The views of the Chiefs of Staff strengthened the preference of the British and Polish Governments. Since political arguments against an alliance had already seemed to Ministers in London to outweigh any possible military advantages to be gained from such a course, the Chiefs of Staff had simply been asked to estimate the value of the Soviet armed forces and not to comment on the specific issue of a guarantee. Their broad conclusion was that while all three branches of Russia's Services, and in particular the Army, had suffered from the purges and their paper strength was misleading because not backed by adequate reserves or by an efficient war industry and very severely limited by deplorable communications, Russian assistance would nevertheless be to the Allies' advantage. But it would not be as great as generally supposed; for military purposes Russia could be counted only as a power of medium rank. Perhaps, therefore, the greatest benefit would come from the fact that Germany would be unable to draw upon the immense Soviet resources of food and raw

* The French had themselves been sounding the Russians and it was then that their conviction about reciprocity was formed.⁽⁸⁾

† A warning from Sir William Seeds that to act in this way would confirm the Soviet belief that we did not mean business was received shortly before the Cabinet meeting, but was not mentioned during the discussion.⁽¹⁰⁾

‡ The Foreign Secretary reported Gafencu's visit briefly to the Cabinet and it was mentioned more briefly to the F.P.C.⁽¹¹⁾

materials and would thus succumb more quickly to an economic stranglehold. Apart from this, Russia's main help to the Allies would be in the Baltic where her fleet could contain considerable German naval forces and interfere with iron ore supplies from Sweden, while in the Black Sea the Russian Fleet would be superior to any likely combination of enemy forces. On land Russia could not give much material support to Poland because the appalling transport conditions would prevent her maintaining on her Western Front more than about thirty divisions. For the same reason she could maintain no appreciable forces in Roumania by land, and by sea would be limited by an inadequate mercantile marine. But she could probably resist a German advance through the Baltic countries and would be able to contain substantial German troops in the east in the event of Poland and Roumania being overrun. The Soviet Air Force could be a limited threat to Germany and Italy from bases in Poland, Roumania and Turkey, always assuming such bases were made available, and could to some extent strengthen Poland's air defences and could contain on the Eastern Front a number of German defence units. But not much hope was based on these possibilities. Finally, in the Far East, Russian forces would be an added deterrent to Japan, and of some assistance to China if only in containing Japanese army and air force units that might otherwise be used against her.⁽¹²⁾

On 3rd May the Cabinet reaffirmed their earlier decision.^{(13)*} The meeting took place a few days after a speech by Hitler in which he had denounced both the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Polish-German Treaty although leaving the door open for further negotiations; in that same speech, however, he made almost no mention of Russia, and the possible sinister significance of this was not overlooked. Lord Halifax himself felt that for the Soviet Union to react to our policy by throwing herself into Germany's arms was only a 'bare possibility', but the Secretary of State for War thought that, although this might indeed seem 'fantastic', nonetheless 'natural orientation' suggested some such alignment. Otherwise the Cabinet discussion covered much the same ground as before, with Italy, between whom and France Lord Halifax was trying to promote better relations, and Japan, who was thought to be resisting Axis blandishments, added to those countries which would be adversely affected by an Anglo-Soviet alliance.

On the same day the French, though without much enthusiasm, said that they now had no objection to our plan provided we could get Soviet support for it.^{(14)†} The essential object was to make sure that, in the event of war against Germany, France and Britain

* See above, p. 723.

† This message was not received in London till the 4th.

would get help from Russia. The Poles, who had been informed but not asked for their views, made no comment.⁽¹⁵⁾ Before we went any further M. Litvinov was succeeded as Foreign Commissar by M. Molotov.

2. *Molotov's Proposals, May 1939*

With this change the F.P.C. asked Sir William Seeds to find out if the Litvinov plan was still the one the Russians favoured and, if so, to ask M. Molotov not to press for its acceptance. Seeds was also instructed to submit to Molotov a revised declaration which was a tightened-up version of our first draft. We now referred specifically to the Anglo-French guarantees of Poland and Roumania and made Soviet action conditional on Britain and France being involved in war as a result of those guarantees. The condition that Soviet assistance must be desired by the countries concerned remained, and we now added that it would be afforded 'on such terms as might be agreed'. By thus narrowing down our first draft to Poland and Roumania specifically it was hoped to convince the Soviet Government that we were in truth providing for a reciprocal assurance of common action, since they, the Russians, would only be committing themselves where we were already committed. And by the deliberately vague remark about the terms of Soviet assistance we hoped to meet that part of Litvinov's plan dealing with no separate peace. In fact that latter provision was one which surely would have worked both ways. It might indeed be undesirable for us to bind ourselves to remain at war for as long as the Soviet Union felt inclined to keep us at it: on the other hand it would be to our interest to guard against a separate Soviet peace with Germany which would enable the latter to throw all her resources against us. But though there was in fact some Cabinet disagreement with the F.P.C. on this point, that disagreement seems to have been on a wider basis. One group of Ministers, headed by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, felt that to make such a provision would give the impression we had made an alliance with Russia; by adding to a somewhat loose and indefinite declaration a firm and definite tripartite arrangement for no separate peace we would be changing the whole basis of our foreign policy and would risk alienating our friends. The other group, notably the Home Secretary, the Colonial Secretary and the President of the Board of Trade, did not accept this argument and were prepared to agree to the provision if the Soviet Government otherwise accepted our plan.⁽¹⁶⁾

On 8th May M. Molotov promised to consider the British draft but added that Soviet policy was so far unchanged. He did, it is true, also say cryptically that this might not hold good if other states

changed their policies, but Sir William Seeds felt that M. Molotov's remarks did not imply any intention to interrupt discussion.⁽¹⁷⁾ This impression was fortified by that of the British Military Attaché to whom Marshal Voroshilov spoke strongly of the need to close the front against Germany;⁽¹⁸⁾ and together the two interviews were used by the Foreign Office to discount the now persistent rumours of a German-Soviet rapprochement. The latest rumour had reached them from the French Ambassador in Berlin, via Sir Nevile Henderson, who himself refrained from comment except to point out the absence of the usual abuse of Bolshevism in the German press. The Foreign Office, thinking such a rapprochement 'inherently improbable', also felt it not only in the interests of the Axis to put such stories about, but also in the interest of the Soviet Union not to be over-hasty in contradicting them since they might well enhance her value in our eyes.⁽¹⁹⁾ In the Cabinet the Foreign Secretary discounted the rumours for another reason: that they were likely to have been spread by people wanting to drive us into a pact with the Soviet Union. And despite the fact that he was faced with the growing anxiety of some Ministers to avoid a breakdown in the negotiations, he showed himself to be wary of going any further than we had already gone. He was soon forced to consider going very much further.⁽²⁰⁾

Then, on 14th May, M. Molotov rejected the British proposals. They placed the U.S.S.R., he said, in a position of inequality by not contemplating either an obligation by Britain and France to guarantee her against direct attack or an extension of the Western guarantees to cover Russia's north-west frontier. In the opinion of the Soviet Government there were at least three indispensable conditions for the creation of an effective barrier against further aggression in Europe:

1. A pact of mutual aid between Britain, France and Russia against such aggression.
2. Guarantees by these three Powers of those States of central and eastern Europe threatened by aggression, including Latvia, Estonia and Finland.
3. A concrete agreement between Britain, France and Russia about the forms and extent of aid to be rendered to each other and to the guaranteed States, (i.e. implying Staff talks and a military agreement) failing which there was a risk (as proved by experience in Czechoslovakia) that a pact of mutual aid might prove ineffective.⁽²¹⁾

M. Molotov thus appeared to have waived the later items in the Litvinov plan—including the one about no separate peace—and M. Maisky, in a talk with Sir Robert Vansittart, stressed the

importance of avoiding a breakdown, indicating that his Government might not press too hard for the inclusion of the Baltic States.⁽²²⁾ Despite these concessions, however, it was clear that we were not likely to get much further with our own present policy and that something radically new was needed from us if the negotiations were to continue; M. Maisky insisted on the need for military conversations, even if the geographical area to be covered by them was more limited than the Russians would have preferred.

The first need, therefore, was for the considered views of the Chiefs of Staff on the specific issue of an alliance with Russia. At the instigation of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence they had already once examined the balance of strategic value between Spain as an enemy and Russia as an ally. They had then decided—assuming that if not actually with us Russia would be neutral—that the advantages of the latter would not offset the disadvantages of a hostile Spain, for the seriousness of the latter was that it would involve a general weakening of the British and French position in North Africa and the western Mediterranean and would threaten their Atlantic communications: if, on the other hand, Russia was neither allied to us nor neutral but allied to Germany, then it would be difficult to exaggerate the dangers that would face us.⁽²³⁾ Now, however, the Chiefs of Staff appeared to be changing their minds and moving over to the view that Soviet aid would be more effective than they had previously thought. The importance of establishing a solid Eastern Front was now held to out-weigh any risk in the Mediterranean. If we did not establish the former front, Russia might turn towards Germany. And even if this did not happen, we still wanted something better than bare neutrality from Russia in order, from the short-term point of view, to draw upon her resources and to enable assistance to be rendered to Poland and Roumania; and, from the long-term point of view, to ensure that Russia was not at the end of a war left in a dominant position in Europe. All in all, therefore, the Chiefs of Staff were in favour of an alliance on a reciprocal basis of assistance if either power were attacked in *Europe*. They were prepared for us to guarantee all Russian territory in Europe partly because they felt that a German attack on Russia through the Baltic States was unlikely. What they did not like was a Western guarantee of the Baltic countries as such, since they wanted no risk of Britain and France bearing the brunt of a German attack with Russia on the defensive behind her own frontier and Poland neutral.⁽²⁴⁾ Indeed, throughout the summer of 1939 the C.O.S. were doubtful not only of Russia's value as a fighting ally outside her own frontiers, but also of her dependability in providing military help so long as she had no common frontier with Germany.

But the F.P.C. as a whole was not yet ready to take the plunge.

Ministers were divided between those agreeing with the Chiefs of Staff and those, led by the Prime Minister, hoping even now to avoid something as drastic as an alliance. In the end the Committee decided that Sir Robert Vansittart should see M. Maisky again unofficially and sound him about an early settlement in which the Soviet Government would give in over the Baltic States and we would agree to immediate Staff talks.⁽²⁵⁾ The Cabinet agreed to this suggestion without being convinced that the Chiefs of Staff were not right and apparently without any great hope of success. For they explicitly reserved to themselves the decision, if it came to one, between a real alliance and a breakdown of negotiations.^{(26)*} The formula to be put to M. Maisky by Sir Robert Vansittart on 17th May was finally drafted by the Prime Minister and Lord Halifax: and it was the nearest we had yet got to genuine reciprocity as desired by Russia. The new formula still clung to a Soviet declaration linked to the Western guarantees of Poland and Roumania, but it continued:

1. Since any action taken by the Government of the U.S.S.R. in accordance with the above-mentioned declaration would only be taken under conditions which had already involved the Governments of the United Kingdom and France in taking corresponding action under the declaration made by them, it results that the three Governments will in these circumstances be engaged in the common task of resisting the act of aggression which had brought the said declarations into operation. Being thus engaged in hostilities in fulfilment of the above-mentioned declarations, the three Governments will give each other all the mutual support and assistance in their power.
2. The three Governments will concert together as to the methods by which such mutual support and assistance could, in case of need, be made most effective.
3. The three Governments are willing to consider in consultation the desirability of their making similar declarations in regard to other European countries.† Should any such declarations be made by the three Governments as a result of such consultations, the provisions of paragraphs 1 and 2 above will apply, and in the event of an act of aggression which brought the said declarations into operation the three Governments, being thus engaged in hostilities in fulfilment of the said declaration, will give each other all the mutual support and assistance in their power.⁽²⁷⁾

* They also undertook to give the F.P.C. their more considered views, but the only one who did so according to the records was the First Lord who felt that the political disadvantages—and by this he meant mainly the effect on such countries as Spain and Japan—outweighed the possible military advantages *unless* the result of no alliance with the West would drive Russia into one with Germany.

† i.e., other than Poland and Roumania.

M. Maisky's reaction was not too unfriendly. Nonetheless on the morning of 19th May he informed Lord Halifax that the new formula was unacceptable, and that the only basis on which the Soviet Government were prepared to proceed was that of a Triple Pact between Britain, France and themselves. Reporting this to the F.P.C. later in the day Halifax also quoted, as a possible explanation of Russian insistence on a directly reciprocal arrangement, the opinion of the Turkish Ambassador in Moscow that what the Russians were really afraid of was an attack by Germany with Polish co-operation, which of course would mean that the Western guarantees would not operate. Be that as it may, the time was obviously approaching when the British Government must either accept Russia's terms or reject them. But with the Foreign Secretary on the point of leaving for a League meeting at Geneva, and in spite of the generally recognised need for urgency, the F.P.C. agreed not to hold the necessary Cabinet Meeting until after the Foreign Secretary's return. In the meantime there must be consultations with the French, Roumanian and Polish Governments.^{(28)*}

The next days were taken up with these consultations, and with further talks between Lord Halifax and M. Maisky in Geneva. In a debate on foreign affairs in the House of Commons, the overwhelming majority of speakers urged greater and much speedier efforts to bring about an alliance for in that lay the best chance to save peace. In doing so they sympathised with the Soviet desire for real reciprocity and criticised the Government for not, so far as the various speakers knew, providing for this, and they showed scant respect for the Government's anxieties about how an alliance with Russia would affect others. Mr. Churchill was particularly vehement on this last aspect, insisting that the best way to influence other countries, for example Italy and Spain, was to show ourselves really strong. But he rather too easily dismissed the difficulty of operations from Poland. He did not believe the Polish Government would place a barrier between arrangements made by Britain, France and the U.S.S.R. for their own mutual security. From the Government spokesmen, of whom Mr. Chamberlain was one, these critics got no satisfaction of their demand for more information or indeed any sign that their words would have any effect.^{(29)†}

Meanwhile the Roumanian Government shied off 'the responsibility of making any suggestion' about current proposals, and

* I have found no record in Foreign Office archives of either M. Maisky's talk with Sir Robert Vansittart or of his Government's objection. The details here have been taken from what Lord Halifax said to the F.P.C.

† In Moscow Sir William Seeds was alarmed at the effect some of the speeches might have on the Russians, in particular Mr. Lloyd George's charges that the Government distrusted Russia and wanted to do without her if possible. He therefore took pains to point out to the Soviet Government the great efforts his own Government were making.

reminded us they did not want to be associated by name in any arrangement made.⁽³⁰⁾ The Poles did not want too much emphasis on the possibility of their asking for Soviet help or any wording that might be construed as providing an alliance against Poland if she attacked Russia: such an attitude was 'of course unthinkable' and this should be made clear to the Russians.⁽³¹⁾ The French were becoming increasingly anxious for results in the near future and were thinking of resuscitating their own earlier plan in which, it now appeared, they had never intended to include the Baltic States. But they were ready to support our new formula if we wanted them to do so.⁽³²⁾ Finally, when Lord Halifax and M. Maisky discussed these matters in Geneva, the latter proved unshakeable in his insistence on a triple mutual guarantee against direct aggression through other States as the only means whereby Russia could be protected against the collapse of buffer states or their intimidation by Germany.⁽³³⁾ M. Maisky agreed with the assessment of Lord Halifax that the core of the problem was that the Soviet Government thought the triple pact of mutual assistance necessary firstly, because by this means alone could Russia be protected against collapse or intimidation by Germany of buffer states, and secondly, because the Russians were to accept new and heavy obligations they could do so only as a part of a system that in their view gave the best hope of preventing war. We therefore had to make up our minds.

3. *Proposals and Counter Proposals for an Alliance,*
May-June 1939

In these circumstances the Cabinet met on 24th May. The Foreign Office had prepared a long analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of an alliance with Russia. This paper now formed the basis of the advice given by the Foreign Secretary to his colleagues and, in spite of the repetition involved, it is perhaps convenient to draw together the threads of the argument here. The first thing to be said against an alliance would be the impression it might give of an 'ideological' bloc against the Axis Powers; it would be inferred that we had given up hope of a settlement with Germany, decided that war was inevitable and were therefore marshalling our forces. Further, although in fact it would be a part of our purely defensive policy of safeguarding the independence of the smaller states, such an alliance could easily be represented as offensive and, by reinforcing the German 'encirclement' propaganda, might destroy the last vestiges of influence of the German moderates—for what that was worth. Worse, it might provoke Hitler to further aggression, Italy might be finally alienated and Spain driven further into the anti-Comintern party: it could offend such countries as Portugal,

Finland and Yugoslavia and further weaken the Balkan Entente; the effect upon Japan might be disastrous, while Roumania and Poland were already known to be full of misgivings. In any case, the actual material support to be expected from the Soviet Union was not as great as might be supposed. Finally, we would be running the risk, either by the failure of Poland or Roumania to resist a German advance or by a German attack upon Russia from the Baltic, of being drawn into a war not for the preservation of a minor state but for the support of Russia against Germany. On this last, public opinion in this country, wholly in favour of protecting the weaker European powers, might be seriously divided.

Some of these arguments, however, could work the other way. For instance, it could be held in favour of an alliance that Germany might be deterred rather than provoked by a show of strength, and Italian policy had always been to reinsure with the stronger side. Again, there were signs that the Western guarantees, unless they were accompanied by considerable supply support, were likely to cause their recipients some misgivings; and since such support in war-time for Poland, for instance, would in great part have to be made good by importation of foreign material through Soviet territory, she might be reassured by a move designed, among other things, to make this more likely. Finally an alliance with Russia, by securing her assistance in all circumstances (i.e. including aggression against western Europe) would on balance be a gain. Though Britain would be committed to go to the support of Russia through the Baltic or through Poland and Roumania, it was unlikely that any such action would be required of us; we would (we hoped) not only be ensuring a two-front war against Germany, but also be avoiding the danger of a neutral Soviet Union being able after the war, with her army intact and England and Germany in ruins, to dominate Europe. It was this last which, it seemed, finally counted with the Foreign Office:

'Even though we may not be able to count implicitly on the Soviet Government either honestly wishing to fulfil, or being capable of fulfilling their treaty obligations, nevertheless, the alternative of a Soviet Union completely untrammelled and exposed continually to the temptation of intriguing with both sides and of playing off one side against the other might present a no less, perhaps more, dangerous situation than that produced by collaborating with a dishonest or an incompetent partner.'⁽³⁴⁾

Lord Halifax told the Cabinet that he was satisfied they were now faced with a clear choice of alternatives. Although he still did not like the prospect of a close association with the Soviet Union, he felt it was impossible in present circumstances to contemplate a break-

down of the negotiations and therefore necessary to prepare ourselves for a direct mutual guarantee agreement. For the exact terms of this he now referred to an earlier suggestion by the Home Secretary linking the proposed arrangement with the League Covenant, a suggestion which was generally agreed to. During this discussion Halifax said he himself thought Germany more likely to be provoked into war by our failure to oppose her with a solid bloc of resistance rather than by our success in so doing. Ministers, generally, felt that an agreement under the League Covenant would be much easier to justify to those who were opposed to association with Russia and would savour much less of an alignment of powers than a plain military alliance: further, it would introduce an element of the temporary, even though a time limit would be specified, in that the Covenant might sometime be revised. There was some emphasis on the importance of ensuring proper consultation before action was taken by any of the participants which might lead to war, and Halifax said that he would try to get our arrangements with Poland and Turkey (and presumably Roumania too) similarly tied to the League.^{(35)*}

The Governments of the smaller powers concerned were then informed of our plans, with assurances that their views would be respected. They raised no objections, but the three Baltic States were no less suspicious of Russia than were Poland and Roumania and they were emphatic that all they wanted was to remain aloof from the quarrels of the larger powers.⁽³⁷⁾ The French not only agreed to our plan but suggested that the approach to Moscow should be joint.⁽³⁸⁾ On 27th May, therefore, Sir William Seeds and the French Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, M. Payart, discussed with M. Molotov the Allied text, a copy of which he had already received from Paris.

The new proposed agreement provided for Russian help to France and Britain if either of the latter were attacked by another European power either directly, or because of their help given to other states whom they had undertaken to protect against aggression and whom the same European power had already attacked. France and Britain agreed to go to the help of Russia in similar circumstances. It was also proposed, to protect the interests of the other states mentioned above, that the rendering of support and assistance to them would be without prejudice to their rights and position. Further, the three powers—Russia, France and Britain—would communicate to each

* Since South Africa had first expressed an opinion, there had been references to the views of other Dominions at various times. These were now embodied in the paper which was before the Cabinet at this meeting.⁽³⁶⁾ Broadly speaking, though with various degrees of enthusiasm, they all felt it would be right to make an agreement rather than risk a breakdown. Mr. Chamberlain in a private letter of 28th May gives himself and Sir Horace Wilson the credit for the idea of a link with the Covenant.

other the details of any relevant commitments already entered into, and each would consult the others before undertaking any further commitments. The agreement would last for five years with the possibility of renewal.^{(39)*}

We had thus conceded the principle of a triple alliance. But our expectations of now achieving an early settlement were at once dashed by M. Molotov stating that his personal reaction was negative.⁽⁴¹⁾ The long weeks of wrangling, characterised by more and more Allied concessions to a more or less rigid Soviet Government, were about to begin.

While awaiting the formal Soviet reply Sir William Seeds advised the Foreign Office against any more concessions. M. Molotov had taken our introduction of the League into these affairs as evidence that we were making co-operation dependent upon the interminable delays of League procedure, and he had criticised our draft for providing nothing but consultation in moments of danger. At a meeting with M. Molotov on 27th May, and again two days later, Sir William Seeds insisted that reference to League principles did not mean the adoption of League procedure and that, in taking account of the feelings of other powers, we were not qualifying our immediate support to Russia. He felt he had made some impression, though rightly anticipating the trouble that lay ahead about the issue of German aggression through the Baltic States.⁽⁴²⁾ The latter had been indicated in a speech by M. Molotov insisting on a triple guarantee of all States bordering on Russia, and it was this that provoked Sir William Seeds into his advice to the Foreign Office. The Ambassador felt that our draft gave Russia all the reciprocity she was entitled to expect, and that such assistance as she could give us was not worth the odium we should earn by yielding to demands for guarantees to countries wanting no such thing. If the Soviet Government was not serious, concessions would serve no useful purpose except to German propaganda: if they really wanted to join us—and there were some grounds for thinking they did—they would accept our offer.^{(43)†}

There were however different signs as well. British and French sources in Berlin had been gathering more reports of a German-Soviet deal. These were of varying degrees of reliability and were, for the most part, very general indications that Herr von Ribbentrop, supported by the German High Command, was urging a still undecided Hitler to conclude an alliance with Russia.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Coupled with these was a tendency in the German press, while

* The provision in Articles I(2) and II(2) for support to a state resisting violation of its neutrality had been suggested unofficially to Lord Halifax in Geneva by the Latvian Minister for Foreign Affairs.⁽⁴⁰⁾

† Sir William Seeds did not specify what his grounds for this belief were.

almost contemptuous of an Anglo-Soviet alliance, to work up public opinion against British encirclement policy and to minimise Russia's part. Sir Nevile Henderson saw in this only a German hope that Russia might be kept out of the coalition and, although he thought there were negotiations going on, felt that Russia was not nearly so important to the general state of affairs as some supposed. Hitler's fear of Russia was not such that her alliance with Britain would prevent him from precipitating a crisis if he wanted to do so: the only thing that might make him pause was the might and tenacity of Britain herself.⁽⁴⁵⁾* From the Russian side, however, there came what seemed an ominous remark. In his speech on the 31st May M. Molotov saw 'no necessity for refusing commercial relations with such countries as Germany and Italy' while still negotiating with the Western Powers. Of this Sir William Seeds said:

'As regards the risk of their compounding with Germany in the political sphere I have never thought it more than just a possibility at any time and I now think that the Soviet Union is sufficiently covered by our commitments in the matter of Poland and Roumania and Turkey to remove any serious temptation to indulge in so remarkable a *volte face* if our present negotiations broke down. We would probably find ourselves confronted by Soviet-German commercial and economic negotiations but judging by M. Molotov's speech we may expect this in any case so far as the Russians are concerned in spite of the Soviet press attack on us whenever we do anything but boycott the Axis Powers.'⁽⁴⁶⁾

It was to this background that the formal Soviet reply was received. On 2nd June Molotov handed to the French and British Ambassadors what he described as 'the text of the Anglo-French proposed agreement modified to meet the views of the Soviet Government'. The Soviet proposals were in many respects the same as those of France and Britain. But there were three very important differences. First, the Soviet text mentioned, specifically, possible aggression against France, Britain, Russia, Belgium, Greece, Turkey, Roumania, Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Finland; and, by omitting Holland and Switzerland—as important to Anglo-French security as the Baltic States to the security of Russia—had failed to provide what Britain and France were bound to regard as true reciprocity. Second, there was no provision expressly protecting the

* It would seem that at this point Sir Nevile Henderson was to some extent right. Enemy documents do show Hitler more concerned at this stage to neutralise Britain than Russia.⁽⁴⁶⁾ What the effect on him of an Anglo-Soviet alliance would have been is only speculation, but the French Ambassador took exactly the opposite view to Sir Nevile Henderson.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The information about the German High Command was correct but Robertson thinks Herr von Ribbentrop was not so much making the running as acting, as always, as Hitler's exaggerated echo.

rights and position of the smaller powers. Third, the Soviet proposals retained both the 'no separate peace' clause, and one making the whole agreement dependent upon the conclusion of a military convention by providing that political agreement and military convention should enter into force simultaneously.^{(49)*}

The F.P.C. paid no heed to Sir William Seed's advice. They held two rambling discussions at which they decided to try a compromise. The point most to the fore in these talks was the scope of the guarantees of the smaller States, and the Committee failed to make up their minds whether the advantages of a firm automatic arrangement committing Russia if Germany acted against, for instance, Holland, outweighed the disadvantages of similar commitments for the West if Germany acted against one of the Baltic States. On the whole they felt they did not, though some Ministers thought we might have to concede the point.⁽⁵⁰⁾

To facilitate further negotiations Lord Halifax now decided to send Mr. Strang, head of the Central Department of the Foreign Office, to Moscow as an expert adviser who was also well-versed in the way Ministers' minds were working. The fact that a comparatively junior official was selected was to be much criticised in Parliament, but Lord Halifax's primary consideration seems to have been to avoid an appearance of running after the Russians. He had therefore decided not to send a mission to Moscow, and his original intention to summon Sir William Seeds home for consultation instead was frustrated by the Ambassador's illness.

The Foreign Office drew up a memorandum on which Sir William Seeds and Mr. Strang were to base their tactics.⁽⁵¹⁾ It began by listing those points on which the three Powers were agreed:

1. The Treaty should place all three Powers on an equal footing in which each undertook similar obligations towards the other two.
2. Mutual assistance if one was directly attacked by a European Power or if one went to the support of certain European States it had undertaken to assist.
3. Action should be in harmony with League principles but not dependent upon League action.
4. Immediate consultation as to methods, forms and extent of assistance.
5. Consultation if a threat of aggression occurred and if necessary a decision on the moment and manner of application of the mechanism of mutual aid as provided in 4.

* The Article in the Soviet draft enumerating the countries to be defended against aggression was Article I: that providing for the simultaneous entry into force of the political and military agreements—the latter presupposing Staff talks—was Article VI. These are the two Articles frequently referred to in this section.

6. Communication of the terms of undertakings given to other States and consultation before assuming further obligations.

The chief point on which agreement had not been reached was to which states the guarantees in item 2 were to apply. The British Government could not accept the enumeration of those states as suggested in the Russian draft; firstly, because of the unwillingness of some of them to be guaranteed and all of them to be mentioned in the Treaty at all, secondly because anyway the list did not give full reciprocity to the West. Instead we suggested, for the unguaranteed countries, the application of the consultation procedure outlined in the Russian draft in the event of a threat to the independence or neutrality of a European State which one of the contracting powers thought was also a menace to its own security: if, as a result of this consultation, the other two Powers agreed that the menace existed, the mutual support provisions would apply. The other two points of difference were about no separate peace and the interdependence of the political and military parts of the treaty. For the latter we reiterated our readiness for immediate Staff talks but we doubted whether a concrete military arrangement covering every contingency was possible within a reasonable time, and viewed with dismay the effect on the European situation of a consequent postponement of the whole agreement. We suggested, therefore, a clear provision in the Treaty for Staff talks to take place immediately after the conclusion of the political agreement, with an understanding between the three Powers that these should be inaugurated within a specified time. Finally we were prepared to bargain about no separate peace. We felt it difficult to give such an undertaking without previously having agreed what were the objects which peace was to achieve, and this was not possible before the circumstances producing the war were known. However, if there were no other points outstanding we would be ready to consider some provision in this direction. Thus the only points on which we were holding firm were the guarantees of the Baltic States and the interdependence of the political and military parts of the Treaty.

The French Government agreed without enthusiasm to our memorandum and told its Ambassador to support Sir William Seeds.⁽⁵²⁾ The British had so far paid little attention to French criticism that the policy we were pursuing would only make the Soviet Government more suspicious of our sincerity; and we had rather summarily discarded their own ideas, which went much further towards the Soviet draft than ours, urging that they should not submit them to Moscow.⁽⁵³⁾ The time was to come when we had to give their proposals more attention, but for the moment our own held the field. Sir William Seeds had been authorised to give all or

part of the Foreign Office memorandum to M. Molotov if he and his French colleague thought fit; they did so on 15th June, the first meeting with M. Molotov since Mr. Strang's arrival. M. Molotov made few comments of substance, but was uncompromising.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The next day he handed over his Government's refusal. Rather than accept 'the position of inequality, humiliating for the Soviet Union' which the Russians saw in the Allied draft, they would prefer a treaty confined to mutual aid in the case of direct attack only.⁽⁵⁵⁾

4. *Revised terms for a Political Agreement,
June-July 1939*

The Foreign Office was not in favour of the limited treaty suggested by M. Molotov and new instructions to Sir William Seeds at last paid some attention to French views. The French draft, which earlier we had so summarily discarded, had included proposals for support between the three major Powers in case of direct aggression against one of them, or in the event of aggression against a limitrophe or a guaranteed state, and in response to a request from a State for aid in resisting violation of its neutrality. It also provided for no separate peace, a matter which the French thought as much to our advantage as to Russia's.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Lord Halifax's new draft of the vital Article I, which the French approved, contained provision for mutual support against direct aggression or against guaranteed states as before; it further proposed resistance to aggression 'which, being directed against another European state, thereby constituted a menace to the security' of one of the three great Powers.⁽⁵⁷⁾ We had thus dropped our proposal for consultation in these cases, but Lord Halifax thought that the effect would be the same, since no one country could impose on the others its own views of what constituted a menace, and that the question would in practice have to be settled by consultation. And we made another concession too. Sir William Seeds was told that, if no other points were outstanding, then he could drop altogether our objections to the 'no separate peace' clause.^{(58)*}

On 21st June the two Ambassadors submitted the new draft Article I to M. Molotov. They said that further discussion about the holding of Staff talks was necessary and hinted that there would be no more trouble about 'no separate peace'. And M. Naggiar made

* The F.P.C. took the decision about no separate peace, but otherwise merely noted what the Foreign Office had already done.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Some Ministers, e.g. The Home Secretary, seemed in favour of a limited Tripartite Treaty, but did not press the point. On the whole, the Committee felt such an outcome would be regarded as a failure, and might precipitate German action against Danzig and leave the U.S.S.R. sulky and dissatisfied.

a personal suggestion which was soon to assume great importance. As a way out of the difficulty of deciding which countries were to be supported against aggression, he asked whether the Soviet Union would be satisfied if the names of such countries were contained in a separate document which need not be published.^{(60)*} M. Molotov was ready to discuss this provided the British and French Governments put it forward, but was not otherwise helpful. The next day he formally rejected the new Allied proposals for Article I and said that his Government could no longer offer a more limited treaty. The Soviet plan of 2nd June therefore still held the stage, although there seemed reason to think that M. Molotov might consider some re-drafting of his own Article I since it had been submitted 'for discussion'.⁽⁶²⁾

With this in mind Lord Halifax took up M. Naggiar's suggestion of a secret list of states to be protected against aggression. Halifax felt that even though the details of the secret list would eventually leak out, it would still not be so bad for the smaller states as enumeration in the published treaty. But he was also thinking in terms of a possible open enumeration, assuming Holland and Switzerland were included, if M. Molotov proved adamant. Some members of the F.P.C. including the Home Secretary, and the Colonial Secretary, preferred to go to this latter stage straightaway, but others, including the Prime Minister, feared that this would lead to repudiation of an agreement by the smaller powers concerned. There was a third group, which included the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, who felt that the best answer in the circumstances was a simple arrangement against direct aggression applying only to the three major Powers.

The upshot of the F.P.C. discussion was a new draft Article I for submission to M. Molotov:

'The United Kingdom, France and the U.S.S.R. undertake to give to each other immediately all effective assistance should one of these countries become involved in hostilities with a European Power as a result of aggression by that Power against any one of these three countries, or aggression by it against another European State which the contracting country concerned felt obliged to assist in maintaining its independence or neutrality against such aggression.'

This formula could, if M. Molotov required it, be supplemented by a secret agreement containing agreed lists of the countries the three Powers felt obliged to assist, subsequent alterations to which

* The French Ambassador was by now playing an important part. Sir William Seeds had already paid tribute to him.⁽⁶¹⁾

would similarly be privately agreed.^{(63)*} Later, the wording was yet further amended to provide for the resistance of Russia, France and Britain to aggression against 'another European state whose independence or neutrality the contracting country concerned felt obliged to *defend* against such aggression', and, to meet French wishes, Luxembourg was included in the list.^{(65)†} Thus we had come full circle. To all intents and purposes we had abandoned our position in relation to the smaller powers. We had given the Soviet Government the right to decide whether any particular aggression constituted such a threat to their own security that they must intervene. And we had assumed an automatic commitment to help in that event. The only points on which we were taking a stand were the inclusion of Holland and Switzerland and the signature of the general political agreement before Staff talks were held.

But the Soviet Government had by no means done. An unhelpful meeting of the Ambassadors with M. Molotov on 1st July foreshadowed his Government's formal reply which he handed over on the 3rd. The latter accepted an unpublished list of third party countries to be protected (provided Holland and Switzerland were not included) and, for the rest took the form of yet another draft Article I, a new Article III based on our own draft of the 15th June, but enlarging the scope for consultation, and including a suggested secret protocol. The proposed Articles ran as follows:

Article I 'The United Kingdom, France and the U.S.S.R. undertake to give each other immediately all effective assistance if one of these three countries becomes involved in hostilities with any European Power as a result either of aggression aimed by that Power against one of the three countries, or of aggression, *direct* or *indirect*, aimed by that Power against any European state whose independence or neutrality one of the three countries concerned feels obliged to defend against such aggression. . . .'

Article III 'Without prejudice to immediate rendering of assistance in accordance with Article I and with a view to securing its more effective organisation, the three contracting Governments *will exchange information periodically about the international situation and will lay down the lines of mutual diplomatic support in the interests of peace*, and in the event of circumstances arising which threaten to call

* Spurred on, no doubt by rumours, the Dutch lost no time in strongly protesting, with threats of publication. In the end they announced their determination to stand aloof from European rivalries.⁽⁶⁴⁾

† Lord Halifax also instructed Sir William Seeds about verbal alterations to the other articles, for use when they came up for discussion.⁽⁶⁶⁾

into operation the undertakings of mutual assistance in Article I, they will, on request of any one of them, immediately consult together to examine the situation and to determine jointly the moment at which mechanism of mutual assistance shall be put into immediate operation and manner of its application, independently of any procedure of League of Nations.'

Unpublished Protocol 'It is understood between the three contracting Governments that Article I of Agreement between them signed today will apply to following European states *in the event either of direct aggression or indirect aggression, under which latter term is to be understood an internal coup d'état or a reversal of policy in the interests of the aggressor:* Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Roumania, Turkey, Greece and Belgium.

The foregoing list of countries is subject to revision by agreement between the three contracting Governments.

The present *supplementary* understanding will not be made public.'⁽⁶⁷⁾*

It was the suggested secret protocol which proved the principal bone of contention in the last stage of these negotiations. M. Molotov explained that he could agree to extend Soviet liabilities to Holland and Switzerland (he did not seem to bother much about Luxembourg) only if he had compensation in the form of treaties of mutual assistance with Poland and Turkey: if he had these, then those two countries could be dropped from the secret protocol and could be replaced by Holland and Switzerland. He would not accept M. Naggiar's personal suggestion that a promise by Britain and France to try to persuade Poland and Turkey to this end might be sufficient warrant for the inclusion of the two Western Powers in the list: agreements with Turkey and Poland must be at least simultaneous with the agreement of the three Great Powers. He also mentioned as a difficulty the absence of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Holland and Switzerland.⁽⁶⁸⁾

The Foreign Secretary reported to the F.P.C. on 4th July. In his dislike of the Soviet definition of indirect aggression, and in his hesitation to give in over Holland and Switzerland, he had reached the stage of favouring, as an alternative to a deadlock, a limited Tripartite Pact fortified by immediate Staff talks and by provisions for consultation in regard to contingencies not covered by the pact. He realised that the strongest argument against this course was that, in making no provision for Poland, it might encourage Hitler to some violent adventure, but if this happened Hitler would still be

* Passages in italics are so marked by the author.

up against France and ourselves. The Prime Minister agreed.* He felt we would thus get rid of some embarrassing complications and might find Russia easier to deal with, and he thought it would not provoke Hitler who would probably suspect secret provisions behind the simple facade anyway. However, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary did not carry the day; although their colleagues disliked the Russian definition of indirect aggression, they were not disposed to mind much about excluding Holland and Switzerland and were by no means certain that a triple pact was the answer. Eventually the Committee agreed to offer the Soviet Government two alternatives: *either* an agreement in which they dropped their definition of indirect aggression and we abandoned our insistence on Holland and Switzerland *or* a triple pact with the consultation provisions suggested by the Foreign Secretary. If the Russians preferred the first there might be similar consultation provisions for countries not on the list though we would not press this too far; if they preferred the second, there must be no reference to indirect aggression though it might be covered by the consultation provision.⁽⁶⁹⁾

The Cabinet confirmed this decision the next day.⁽⁷⁰⁾ But, once more because of the French, there were modifications before the instructions went to Sir William Seeds. The French were much more anxious than we were about Holland, Switzerland and Luxembourg and, although against anything smacking of interference in other people's affairs, were taking a slightly more accommodating view of the problems of indirect aggression than we were.⁽⁷¹⁾ We, therefore, decided not to present the Soviet Government with a choice of alternatives, but to try to get them to relent about Holland, Switzerland and Luxembourg.

Meanwhile, for the negotiations of the treaty on its original basis, Sir William Seeds was sent a new draft Article III containing an alteration in wording from the latest Soviet draft so as to avoid binding the parties to determine exactly the date at which they would embark on war at a time when there was still only a threat of aggression.⁽⁷²⁾ Sir William Seeds and M. Naggiar saw M. Molotov on 8th and 9th July and found him insistent on the Russian view about indirect aggression and becoming impatient about Staff talks as

* Some indication of the Prime Minister's views at this stage can be gained from letters he wrote on 2nd and 15th July to his sisters. In the first he reported that the Cabinet were so desperately anxious for an agreement with the Russians 'and so nervous of the consequences of failure to achieve it that I have to go very warily, but I am so sceptical of the value of Russian help that I should not feel that our position was so greatly worsened if we had to do without them. In any case we can't go on much longer on our present course'. On 15th July, Chamberlain commented: 'I am glad to say that Halifax is at last getting "fed up" with Molotov. . . . If we do get an agreement as I rather think we shall, I am afraid I shall not regard it as a triumph. I put as little value on Russian military capacity as I believe the Germans do. . . . I would like to have taken a much longer time with them all through, but I could not have carried my colleagues with me'.

well. The rest of the treaty was now more or less agreed because of the concessions we had made on the Russian draft of 2nd June. On Article VI and the Staff talks all M. Molotov would concede was his suggestion of a fixed date for the conclusion of the military agreement; nonetheless he was adamant that this and the political agreement should not only come into force, but should also be signed simultaneously. For Article I he insisted upon mention of indirect aggression, and submitted in a new protocol a definition even worse from our point of view than before:

'The expression "indirect aggression" covers action accepted by any of the above-mentioned States (the list remained unchanged from the earlier Soviet draft) under threat of force by another Power, or without any such threat, involving the use of territory and forces of the State in question for purposes of aggression against that State or against one of the contracting parties, and consequently involving the loss of, by that State, its independence or violation of its neutrality.'

M. Molotov explained that by 'without any such threat', he intended to guard against Latvia or Estonia making an agreement with Germany inconsistent with their independence or neutrality without Germany having threatened anything. By 'use of the forces of the State in question' he meant the employment of German officers or instructors by the Estonian or Latvian Armies and the transformation of those armies into instruments of aggression against the Soviet Union; and to make things still more difficult about Holland and Switzerland, he insisted that they should be in diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union before Article I could apply, though he did admittedly seem disposed to consider provision in the Protocol for consultation in the event of aggression against them. He declined to include Luxembourg.⁽⁷³⁾

The issues facing the Western Powers were, therefore, what to do about (i) Holland, Switzerland and Luxembourg, (ii) the various definitions of indirect aggression and (iii) Article VI and the military talks. The first seems to have been decided between the two Powers without either much trouble or discussion: those smaller states would be dropped from the secret protocol and provision sought simply for consultation in the event of aggression against them. About the other two, the French held views substantially different from ours. They were prepared to accept the Russian position on indirect aggression, quite ready to start Staff talks at once, and were firm about not awaiting their conclusion before signing a political agreement. They feared that a military agreement through Staff talks would be difficult to achieve in any case, and that we would run the risk of finding ourselves faced, just when international tension

might be mounting, either with giving in completely to Soviet demands or with a breakdown of all the arrangements. The British on the other hand felt that as long as military talks were taking place we would, in practice, be preventing Russia from entering the German camp; the fact that talks were long drawn out would not matter. Further, if we agreed to the Soviet definition of indirect aggression, with its deplorable implications of interference in the internal affairs of other countries, we would be doing our own cause incalculable harm both at home and throughout the world. We ought, therefore, to insist upon our definition (i.e. the test must be whether the country concerned had, under threat of force, actually lost its independence or neutrality) but we would now have it published openly in Article I. If M. Molotov agreed to this we would give in about Article VI, and if he did not agree, he must be told of our view that the next best course would be a tripartite pact with provision for consultation about states not covered in it.⁽⁷⁴⁾ In discussion we were able to persuade the French to accept our view about indirect aggression, but they remained adamant about Article VI. Nor did they yet like the idea of a triple pact.⁽⁷⁵⁾ M. Naggiar himself was firm that we ought to give in about Article VI and so also was Sir William Seeds, who urged that, if the break must come, it should be made on what he considered the vital issue of indirect aggression.^{(76)*}

The British Government had now very nearly reached what was to be their final concession. Sir William Seeds was told that Holland and Switzerland and Luxembourg could be dropped from the proposed agreement, but to stand out against M. Molotov's other two proposals. He was to do everything possible to get M. Molotov to meet us on these, and was to give him to understand that our patience was nearly exhausted.⁽⁷⁸⁾ But this was perhaps not quite as firm as it sounded. For soon afterwards Sir William Seeds was also told that he could agree to the start of Staff talks without awaiting the signature of the political agreement, although Lord Halifax still insisted that M. Molotov must abandon his demand for simultaneous signing of military and political agreements and must meet us as regards Article I.^{(79)†} From here it was only a step to complete capitulation about Article VI.

* Later Mr. Strang wrote home his opinion that Article VI might help us. With no common frontier with Germany, Russia would not be deterred, even if the political agreement had been signed, from saying she could not effectively help us until a military agreement, which would include Poland, had been reached: we would have no such excuse.⁽⁷⁷⁾

† There was, at this point, a divergence between the instructions to Sir William Seeds and those to M. Naggiar. The latter had been told that he could tell M. Molotov that Staff talks could begin there and then. There is no record of any Ministerial consultations before the new instructions went to Sir William Seeds, and at the last F.P.C. meeting on 10th July no such thing had been contemplated. However the relevant F.O. file⁽⁸⁰⁾ shows that the Foreign Office realised the need to get the consent of either the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence or of the C.O.S.: as the draft telegram went off unaltered, this consent was presumably obtained, though there is nothing on paper to say so.

On 17th July M. Molotov insisted upon his version of Article I as providing the only possible safeguards for Soviet security, and was not even willing to make consultation provisions for Holland and Switzerland. He was equally adamant about Article VI. Unless Britain and France agreed to regard the political and military parts of the Treaty as one inseparable whole, there was no point in continuing negotiations. M. Naggiar and Sir William Seeds now made it clear that military talks should start at once, provided the outstanding political points were settled: but all M. Molotov thought his Government would consider was for the political talks to continue parallel to the military ones.⁽⁸¹⁾

The French now felt very strongly that there was nothing for it but to accept Article VI and to start Staff talks immediately. The urgent need to get an agreement of some kind, even if not an ideal one, made every other consideration take second place, and they felt that if we gave in about Article VI we might induce M. Molotov to compromise on a redrafted Article I.⁽⁸²⁾ The F.P.C. in London, however, felt that we must in any case take a stand on our own version of Article I, although they accepted Lord Halifax's idea of including in it provision for consultation in the event of action not falling within our definition of indirect aggression. If the Soviet Government accepted this, we would accept their Article VI provided the resulting Staff talks did not begin until political agreement had been reached even if not signed. The F.P.C. were insistent that we must really make a stand and showed some anxiety that our negotiators in Moscow were being weak. Nonetheless they agreed with Sir William Seeds that, if there was to be a breakdown, it should come on the vital indirect aggression issue.⁽⁸³⁾

Perhaps it was this last point which persuaded Lord Halifax to go further in his instructions to Sir William Seeds than had so far been authorised by the F.P.C. The Ambassador was told to give in about Article VI, that is to say to agree to the Russian demand for the simultaneous entry into force of the military and political agreements, but still to hold firm about Article I. We had, in fact, ceased to play the one off against the other. Further, in the last resort he could agree to the immediate initiation of Staff talks without awaiting final political agreement and, in particular, without M. Molotov making concessions on Article I. Sir William Seeds was instructed to go thus far, however, only if, after he had put the British view about the two Articles, a breakdown seemed imminent.^{(84)*}

Until he had tested M. Molotov's reactions Sir William Seeds did not want to make use of this last concession.⁽⁸⁵⁾ But the test showed

* The instruction went off without either a Cabinet or a F.P.C. meeting. Nor do the Foreign Office files record any discussion.

the French to have been right. When M. Molotov received the two Ambassadors on 23rd July he was, initially, so pleased about Article VI that he went as far as to anticipate no insuperable difficulties about Article I. But he cooled off immediately when he learned of the unchanged British view that the start of military talks should await the political settlement, and remained unshakeable about holding both sets of talks concurrently.⁽⁸⁶⁾ In a telegram home in which he said that immediate Staff talks seemed the only answer, Sir William Seeds also said he felt hopeful that M. Molotov really would meet us on the political issue once these latter had begun.⁽⁸⁷⁾

On 25th July Lord Halifax told Sir William Seeds to agree to the immediate initiation of military talks in Moscow and to point out to M. Molotov that, since we had met him on this point, we expected him to meet us about Article I in order that the political talks could be speedily and satisfactorily concluded: we attached as much importance to the latter as he did to the military talks.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Sir William Seeds did this on the 27th and, after M. Molotov had declined to associate his Government with any joint announcement, the Prime Minister baldly stated in the House on the 31st that British and French Military Missions were going to Moscow as soon as possible and that, concurrently with their talks, discussions would continue with a view to reaching final conclusions on the terms of the political agreement. He ended by saying that our mission would be headed by Admiral the Hon. Sir Reginald Plunkett-Erle-Drax and would include Air Marshal Sir Charles Burnett and Major General T. G. G. Heywood.⁽⁸⁹⁾* The French delegation was to be headed by General Doumenc: the Soviet by Marshal Voroshilov.

Before going on to the military talks, it will be convenient to deal here with the little that took place from this time on in the political negotiations. On 26th July the F.P.C. decided once more to stand firmly by our version of Article I and seemed quite hopeful this would work now that we had given away so much.⁽⁹³⁾ Instructing Sir William Seeds to this effect, the Foreign Office also provided him with a new draft for inclusion in Article I providing for consultation in circumstances not covered by our definition of indirect aggression. But this had not reached Moscow by the time Sir William Seeds and M. Naggiar saw M. Molotov again on the 27th.

* The Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence had decided in favour of separate rather than joint Allied Missions working on a common basis.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Both Namier⁽⁹¹⁾ and Wheeler-Bennet⁽⁹²⁾ draw attention to the fact that the members of the British Delegation were not of the same standing as those recently sent to Poland and Turkey, and contrasted their ranks with that of Marshal Voroshilov, C.-in-C. of the Russian Army. While there is some truth in this it is also proper to point out that the Chiefs of Staff themselves and their deputies were fully engaged in London and that the officers sent to Moscow were senior in rank to those who had formed the regular members of the British Delegation to the Anglo-French Staff talks.

This meeting was primarily to tell M. Molotov about the staff talks, but such discussion as there was of the political issues was not enough to justify our hopes. M. Molotov talked about the various likely forms of indirect aggression, quoting President Hacha's capitulation in Prague, and considered what Danzig's position would be if an internal movement threatened a change in Danzig's external position.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Sir William Seeds was therefore told that Article I would apply only if action against Danzig was of such a nature as to constitute the threat to Poland that would in any case bring the Allied guarantee into operation. And, in a vain endeavour to stop any more of these examples being raised, we suggested an alteration to our definition of indirect aggression so as to make clear that we intended not so much to cover all possible contingencies as to indicate a class of borderline cases which would fall within the scope of the treaty.⁽⁹⁵⁾

M. Molotov may not have been exactly helpful on 27th July. When he next met the Ambassadors on 2nd August he was positively difficult ostensibly because of remarks made by Mr. R. A. Butler, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, winding up a debate in the House of Commons on 31st July. These remarks, M. Molotov said, grossly misrepresented the Soviet attitude to the Baltic States by implying that the Soviet Government wanted to infringe the independence of these States when on the contrary what it wanted was the guarantee of that independence. After this he expressed his dislike of our latest suggestions dealing with indirect aggression although he admitted that he had no concrete proposals of his own to make but would let us know if he had; and nothing anyone could say moved him an inch. Finally he reverted to Mr. Butler's sins, and Sir William Seeds was left to tell the Foreign Office that he feared the negotiations had received a severe setback.^{(96)*}

In these circumstances Sir William Seeds felt that if we were going to stand out for our own version of Article I, which would imply a pause in the conversations, Mr. Strang could usefully return home to report.⁽⁹⁸⁾ Mr. Strang duly arrived in London on 8th August. As things turned out he did not go back to Moscow, but his advice led Lord Halifax (with French concurrence) to send to Sir William Seeds on 17th August four alternative definitions of indirect aggression for inclusion in Article I. With the military talks now in acute difficulties, however, both Sir William Seeds and M. Naggiar preferred to wait before approaching M. Molotov again.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Since the military difficulties were never sorted out, the new political definitions were destined never to be discussed.

* The storm in a tea-cup about Mr. Butler was later admitted by M. Maisky to have been partly due to the incorrect version of the former's remarks by the Tass Agency.⁽⁹⁷⁾

These long and tortuous political negotiations have been described at length because they are, from any realistic point of view, inseparable from the brief and fruitless military talks which took place in Moscow in the last week or two before the outbreak of war. So far as the British were concerned—and there were undoubtedly some differences of emphasis between themselves and the French in this—the military talks were, throughout, characterised by the same reluctance which was evident in Britain's attitude when the political talks with the Russians began, and reflected little or nothing of the process of accommodation which, superficially at any rate, had developed during the months of April to July.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Even if it had been possible to come to agreed terms with the Russians in 1939 it is hardly conceivable that such a result could have been achieved on the basis of what the British and French missions took with them to Moscow in mid-August of that year.

But the importance of the diplomatic discussions during the spring and summer months goes far beyond that. First, and whatever the genuineness or otherwise of the spirit in which the discussions were conducted, they reveal concepts of national strategic interest which were not discussed among the military missions in Moscow in August. Time was too short in Moscow. In any case, the talks there took place within limits decided upon by others than the members of the military missions. Second, what the political discussions revealed in great detail—as did the military talks specifically in relation to Poland—was that the Allies were from the beginning faced with a fundamental contradiction in their attempt to come to some agreement with Russia as a part of a common front against the dictators. The countries of eastern Europe which were assumed to be the likeliest victims of the next stage of German aggression after the final disruption of Czechoslovakia were just as distrustful and fearful of Russia, which was argued to be the one possible source of direct help, as they were of Germany against whom that help was to be given. And who, with all the hindsight of the war and post-war years, is entitled to say that they were wrong?

Finally, and from the purely British side, it is true that Mr. Chamberlain was the prime mover in opposition to an agreement with Russia. It is doubtful whether he genuinely changed his position at all throughout the summer of 1939. But he was not hard pressed to do so by his colleagues, either in full Cabinet or in the very influential F.P.C. Nor did Foreign Office advice, on the whole, do other than confirm the Prime Minister in convictions he already held. Persistent opposition to Mr. Chamberlain's policies came largely from outside the Cabinet, partly from inside the Conservative party from Mr. Churchill, Mr. Eden and their friends, and partly from the Opposition and the Press.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ But what those critics outside

the Cabinet did not, and indeed could not, fully know was the extent to which the Allies had made concessions to Russia, however slowly and unwillingly. The list is not an unimpressive one. The Netherlands and Switzerland were not to be guaranteed by any agreement, the Baltic States were. Despite the sanction it appeared to give for unwanted interference in the affairs of small countries, the Allies nonetheless largely gave way to the Russians on the matter of direct aggression and gave their approval to the inclusion of the definition of indirect aggression within the agreement itself. The Allies also gave way in binding themselves not to conclude a separate armistice or peace. The Soviet Government made no concession of substance.

5. *The British and French Military Missions to Moscow,*
August 1939

It might be thought that during the three months before the Allied Military Missions left for Moscow the advice of the Chiefs of Staff was neither sufficiently asked for nor carefully enough listened to when it was given. Neither they nor the Service Ministers were members of the F.P.C. Their spokesman there was the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Lord Chatfield, who certainly made no secret of his personal dislike of co-operation, let alone an alliance, with Russia. But Lord Chatfield reported the views of his military colleagues fairly and in full, and was given plenty of opportunity to do so. There were several occasions, notably in late April and mid-May, as we have already seen, when the views of the Chiefs of Staff were made known to Ministers.* On the first of these occasions military comment on the value of common action with the Russians was, if not antagonistic, then certainly lukewarm. A few weeks later the emphasis changed, and noticeably. But even when, in mid-May, the Chiefs of Staff clearly thought there was value in involving ourselves in common action with Russia against Germany, their approach was, on the whole, still a negative one; what principally concerned them was the danger that Russia might become allied with Germany rather than ourselves. What they do not appear to have tried to impress upon Ministers was that if, as they now increasingly argued, a two-front war against Germany was an integral part of our grand strategy and if, as they also admitted, we could give little or no direct help to Poland or Roumania or other east European nations for this purpose, then Russia was, in fact, the

* See above, pp. 723 and 727.

only hope. The hope might be a slender one—something which ardent supporters of a Russian alliance too easily forgot. But where else was there to look? As it was, the sense of urgency which might have been expected to enter into the views of the Chiefs of Staff did not appear. Nor was there any urgency in the brief to the British Military Mission when it left for Moscow. In fact, and despite the long weeks of political negotiation carried on with Staff talks as one of the obvious possible results, there was relatively little preparation for such talks in Whitehall and virtually none in conjunction with the French.

The Cabinet had one brief discussion about the forthcoming Staff talks in Moscow on 26th July.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Ministers expected the talks to last a long time, visualised the ultimate inclusion in them of Poland and Turkey, and agreed that the Military Mission must go very carefully indeed until continuing political talks were concluded. But they left the detailed arrangements for the Moscow talks to the Deputy Chiefs of Staff Committee supervised by the C.I.D.⁽¹⁰³⁾ These two committees then drew up, over the signatures of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff, a lengthy document for the guidance of the British Mission.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

This document began with an introduction on general policy which repeated, almost word for word, many of the cautious comments made by Ministers earlier in the summer. The members of the Mission were warned that, since Britain had begun negotiations with Russia only after giving her own guarantees to Poland and Roumania, the Soviet Government had, from the beginning, been in a strong bargaining position and had consistently tried to obtain 'the maximum benefits for herself from the proposed pact of non-aggression in exchange for the offer to co-operate with us'. The main issue which still remained was 'to define the circumstances in which France and Great Britain would assist the Soviet Government, should the latter feel obliged to defend the independence or neutrality of one of the Baltic States'. The purpose of the military talks was to prevent a breakdown in the political negotiations. The talks were to be related to Europe only. Moreover, seeing that no political agreement with the Russians had yet been reached, the members of the Mission were instructed to 'go very slowly with the conversations', keeping a careful eye meanwhile on the progress of the continuing political talks, and were warned against giving away confidential information before a political pact was concluded. They were also reminded that there had been no time to co-ordinate these instructions with those issued to the French delegation, and that despite the fact that both the French and British governments and their respective Chiefs of Staff had been aware for weeks past that combined military talks could well take place.

The introductory instructions to the British Mission ended on a mixed note of optimism and caution. The Russians, despite all the difficulties encountered so far, were thought really 'to desire the conclusion of both the political and military agreements', and the Mission were to impress upon them the importance of a two-front war against Germany. In this process the Mission were instructed to 'avoid labouring our own difficulties but describe in general terms the results to be expected from Franco-British action on the Western Front, at sea and in the air, without disclosing details'.

The remainder of the paper drawn up by the Deputy Chiefs of Staff consisted of a 'strategical note' which concentrated on the Eastern Front. This was not a front dealt with in any detail by the purely Anglo-French Staff talks, but some views about it were being slowly developed during our talks with the Poles. A brief rehearsal of the British concept of that strategy is necessary here in order to make sense of what we now wanted from Russia.

In a two-front war the possibility of which had increasingly been envisaged since our guarantees of Poland and Roumania, a solid and durable front in the east was, as we have seen, fundamental to a successful strategy. But Poland and Roumania, left to themselves, were most unlikely to ensure their own survival. Against the estimated scale of German attack by seventy to seventy-five divisions the Poles could mobilise a force to include forty infantry divisions, fifty-nine independent battalions and eleven cavalry brigades, but for lack of supplies could not raise any more.* Roumania's land forces were only half the size of Poland's and were not rated of good quality. Against Germany's bomber force neither country was likely to be able to do much, if anything. And to make things even worse, they had not, in spite of our efforts, co-ordinated their defence plans. This meant that Germany could probably occupy Roumania, Polish Silesia, the Poznan Salient and the Corridor within a comparatively short time, though any further penetration into Poland would be through difficult country and would take longer. It was obvious that direct help from Britain and France was almost impossible, though indirectly the two Western countries hoped to contain fifty to fifty-five German divisions and, even in a primarily Eastern war, the bulk of Germany's fighter force. The knotty problem of what to do against these German divisions was one the French had yet to decide; but Allied bombers could attack Germany on a scale which, at first

* The figures quoted here were the latest available after our Staff talks with the Poles. They vary for the worse from the Allied point of view from those used in the Ministerial discussions leading to the guarantee to Poland (see above, p. 700) in that the number of Polish divisions was decreased from a minimum 54 to 40 + and the scale of German attack on the East was increased from a 62 maximum to the 75 given above. And as the estimate of Germany's total strength was now up from 110 to 130 divisions this increase in the East did not even mean a corresponding decrease in the West.

limited by the agreed policy about methods of warfare—with which Russia would be asked to concur—could be enlarged if Germany initiated unrestricted air attack. Similarly, in a primarily Western war we could expect no direct help from Poland and Roumania and even indirect help would, in the case of Roumania, amount to no more than denying her economic resources to Germany. Poland might be able to relieve pressure on the West by a limited land offensive supported by her small bomber force, which might induce Germany to leave in the East thirty-one to thirty-five divisions and as much as 20 per cent of her fighters. But obviously, so far as strength on paper was concerned, the most substantial help towards building up an Eastern front, and towards enabling such a front to offer a valuable diversion of German effort should the main scene of operations be in the West, would come from Russia. The advantage to Russia herself of strengthening such a front was thought to be obvious. The survival of Poland and Roumania as geographical barriers between herself and Germany would relieve the permanent tension and partial mobilisation that would be necessary if Germany's frontier were to draw closer. In practice, however, this support would be complicated not only by Polish and Roumanian unwillingness to receive it, but by the probability that anything very substantial was out of the question through transport difficulties. Nevertheless the mere concentration of Russian troops would be a moral support to Poland and Roumania and would reduce the number of divisions Germany would dare to use in the West. Soviet fighters and A/A defence would be a 'vital necessity' on the Polish-German front and were a form of help it might be possible to get the Poles to accept. And, although the Soviet bomber force might be hampered from full co-operation in a general offensive against Germany since it was not normally organised on a mobile basis, if it could operate from the East it would have a very important effect. But, with all these doubts about such material support, probably the most important thing of all was the economic help Russia could give to Poland and Roumania. This might well be the vital factor upon which the maintenance of their resistance would depend.

In the naval sphere, it was not likely that Poland in the Baltic, or Roumania in the Black Sea, could play more than a minor part. But in the Baltic Russia, even though her numerically more or less equal fleet was not as efficient as the German one, would be an effective challenge to Germany's control of sea communications. She should thus contain forces otherwise available elsewhere and should be able to operate against the iron ore traffic. In the Black Sea Russia would be unopposed and, besides helping Roumania, she might send forces to co-operate with Britain and Turkey in the Aegean and

eastern Mediterranean, though we must take care about Russian submarines operating there: and we might get bases in the Black Sea to supplement our not very adequate facilities in the eastern Mediterranean. In return, we might send a limited number of destroyers into the Baltic, although our submarines would be better employed elsewhere in view of the large Soviet submarine force already there; and we might reinforce Soviet patrol craft in Northern waters. Finally, the British Main Fleet would provide cover for Soviet forces outside the Baltic and Russia's shipping would benefit, equally with that of our other Allies, from the measures adopted for its security on the high seas.

The information we wanted from Russia made a formidable list. In addition to a check on our estimates of her strength, what was her rate of mobilisation and concentration in eastern Europe? What assumptions had the Russians made about the alignment and strength of neighbouring states? What were their views about possible enemy strategy and their own policy for the conduct of war in the light of those views? How did they envisage collaboration with the Allies, and did they agree with us about the value of a solid and durable front on Germany's eastern frontiers? If so, what would they like to do about it and to what extent were they prepared to use their army and air forces outside their borders? What armaments and raw materials could they give to Poland, Turkey and Roumania and, remembering transport difficulties, how? What naval policy would they pursue and what base facilities could they offer us in the Baltic, on the Murmansk coast and in the Black Sea?⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

In contrast, the British Delegation's instructions on what to do and say in return positively bristled with caution. The ultimate military convention hoped for was envisaged as a statement of policy in the broadest possible terms, although it was realised that this would be difficult to agree upon since the Russians were bound to want details. However, at any rate to begin with, the Delegation must go very carefully. They were on no account to hand over the strategical note issued to them for their own information, and must use the very greatest discretion about how much of it was discussed, bearing in mind that, since the Russians might attempt to bargain promises of co-operation and items of information, it would be wise for us to avoid raising questions which might lead to embarrassing counter-demands. The defence of the Baltic States must not be discussed, nor must we act as a go-between between Russia, the Baltic States, Poland and Roumania, if the Russians had proposals involving their co-operation. The Delegation could encourage the discussion of matters of supply directly with the Governments concerned but, until an actual invasion perhaps changed their attitude, we could do no more than point out the advantage to Russia of having plans ready

if the need arose.* The disclosure of technical information was precluded and discussion of tactical training and of economic matters relevant to defence issues must be on the broadest lines, care being taken in the latter case not to betray the economic difficulties of our allies. Similarly there must be great circumspection about discussing the estimates of Polish armed strength which we had received from the Poles themselves. And Allied air strengths and performance must not be communicated in detail.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Finally, this extreme caution was extended to the text of the strategical note itself, only one copy of which was to leave England for use by the Delegation when they arrived in Moscow.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ The French were given a copy, which they returned before the Missions left England, and they gave us a copy of the directive to their Delegation. The French paper was described by General Ismay as 'couched in such general terms as to be almost useless as a brief: it deals solely with what the French wish the Russians to do and throws no light on what the French will do.'⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

All this not unnaturally brought a protest from Sir William Seeds who pressed harder a point already mentioned to the C.I.D. by Admiral Drax. Since it was probable that the Russians would evade initialling the political agreement at least until the military talks had made considerable progress, the existing instructions to the Allied Delegations were likely to produce nothing but more Russian suspicions that we were not in earnest.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ The instructions were therefore modified with the aim of concluding the military talks as soon as possible. This meant that our Delegation could now discuss the whole strategical note, except for those parts of purely French concern which must be left to General Doumenc. The issue of the restriction on economic information was raised and the Industrial Intelligence Centre was asked to prepare an up-to-date brief; but we still fought shy of any very detailed discussion of Allied armed strength, in particular that of Poland. And the limitation of the talks to anything more than hypothetical planning remained.^{(110)†}

Meanwhile in Moscow the Delegations had begun their unenviable task.^{(111)‡} At the first meeting on 12th August all three Delega-

* It was here that our real weakness lay. Hypothetical planning was not going to satisfy the Russians and their demands for more were to be the final crisis in the negotiations. We can hardly have failed to foresee this but there seems to have been a general shying away from this issue until the full realisation of the futility of our Delegates' instructions was ultimately forced on us.

† The new instructions were attached as an annexe to the latter D.C.O.S. meeting, and were approved before despatch by the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. The D.C.O.S. paper⁽¹¹¹⁾ did not reach the Delegation in time for discussion before the talks ended: nor did a telegram giving comments on the economic parts of the strategical note.⁽¹¹²⁾

‡ The draft principles were part of a whole military pact which in its entirety was never submitted to the Soviet Delegation: it is reproduced in J.I.C.(40)3, Appendix II. General Doumenc's own account published in May 1947 is much shorter but does not differ in substance from the English version.⁽¹¹⁴⁾

tions agreed verbally upon the principle of devoting all available forces to the establishment of solid fronts, East and West, against further aggression. But Marshal Voroshilov, neither then nor later when we produced a draft, showed any inclination to discuss principles. Indeed, he started as he was to go on by insisting at the first meeting that it was plans that were wanted, and he asked the other two Delegations to produce theirs. The next day, therefore, General Doumenc gave an exposé of the French plan for the West, going into some detail on the strength of the French Army, its fortifications and its mobilisation arrangements, but with rather less detail on strategy. What he did say about strategy conformed to that evolved during the Anglo-French Staff talks. When it came to the British turn General Heywood explained in very general terms indeed the programme for the Army, and remained evasive in the face of pressure from Marshal Voroshilov about the timing of separate items. This was the only point on which there was much cross-examination. But on the third day the blow fell. When the Eastern Front came up for discussion Marshal Voroshilov asked abruptly what part we thought the Soviet Union should play. He refused to be fobbed off by General Doumenc and Admiral Drax who struggled valiantly with their difficult instructions and he put three specific and awkward questions to them: (i) would Soviet forces be allowed to move against East Prussia through Polish territory, particularly the Vilno Gap? (ii) could they move through Polish Galicia to make contact with the enemy? (iii) could they go into Roumania? Without exact and unequivocal answers, Marshal Voroshilov said that he felt it useless to continue the talks. Once these answers were received, however, he would expose his plans in a way that would be found quite satisfactory. After some persuasion and an adjournment for further instructions he agreed that the talks could continue meanwhile, but insisted it was for the West to get the answers.*

This was the start of frenzied activity in London, Paris and Warsaw. The French thought it preferable to deal first with Poland; in the end the Roumanians were not approached at all.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ Sir William Seeds and M. Naggjar felt that it would be useless to try to shake the Russians and urged their Governments to get the Poles to consent to the working out of plans.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ The Deputy Chiefs of Staff spoke out very firmly indeed in favour of the strongest pressure

* General Heywood deduced from the Soviet demands, whatever their political implications might be, that the Russian defences were not nearly so strong as they liked to make out, and that they wanted therefore to keep the battlefield as far away as possible and to take full advantage of co-operation with the Polish Army rather than to risk having to bolster up its remains: this obviously pointed to the need for definite plans before the event. The General went on to urge a favourable answer, without which chances of agreement were small. His two colleagues agreed with him.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

upon Poland and Roumania to 'persuade them to adopt a helpful attitude', since the achievement of a treaty with Russia seemed the best way to prevent war. The consequences of a failure might either be a German-Soviet agreement to share the spoils of eastern Europe or, just as bad for Poland and Roumania, a neutral Russia ready and unexhausted by war to take advantage of her neighbours later on.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ The French Government agreed with these views. M. Bonnet told his Ambassador to Warsaw, M. Noel, to speak to Col. Beck in terms which, certainly by implication, laid upon a Polish refusal the responsibility for a likely breakdown in the current talks in Moscow and all the consequences that might ensue. And he asked for our support.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ This we gave. The British Ambassador in Warsaw, Sir Howard Kennard, was then told of the Soviet demands and of the arguments of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff in their support; he was also authorised to use this information, at his discretion, to bring Col. Beck, with due regard to Polish susceptibilities, to a decision vital to European security and in terms explicit enough to satisfy the Soviet Government.⁽¹²⁰⁾

Sir Howard Kennard had arranged with M. Noel that he (Noel) should see Col. Beck first. The latter did so on 18th August and the result was not satisfactory. Col. Beck promised a considered reply but feared that Hitler would be provoked by Polish acceptance into precipitate action. The two Ambassadors had also agreed not to enter into technical discussions with Col. Beck, since such details would be better left to the military experts; as a result Col. Beck did not then know the exact Soviet demands. But when Sir Howard Kennard eventually saw him later in the day these had been conveyed to the Polish Chief of General Staff, General Stachiewicz, by the French Military Attaché, and Col. Beck's frame of mind consequently grew worse. It seemed to him that by specifying the Vilno Gap and Galicia, the Soviet Union was trying to separate Poland from Roumania and the Baltic States. Sir Howard Kennard developed the Deputy Chiefs of Staff's argument but the most he could get out of Col. Beck was that, if war actually broke out, 'the situation might be different and developments might lead to a modification of the Polish attitude'. The following morning, however, there was a faint gleam of hope. General Stachiewicz, at a meeting with both the Allied Military Attachés, thought it possible that a final formal decision could be postponed until the military factors had been studied further. Whereupon the British Military Attaché suggested that these studies could be helped by a joint memorandum by the British and French staffs, based on the talks in Moscow. In this way, the Poles, if they accepted his suggestion, would by implication be allowing the discussion in Moscow of Polish-Soviet military collaboration. This was followed by Col. Beck

agreeing to treat the whole *démarche* so far as an unofficial exchange of views; and the next day General Stachiewicz agreed to consider the suggested memorandum provided it was clearly understood both that the Polish Government was not committed in any way on the main point at issue, and that his Government's views were unchanged. And this slight advance was made even slighter by the stipulation that the Poles' readiness to study a memorandum was not to be disclosed to the Soviet Government.⁽¹²¹⁾

Meanwhile in Moscow the Soviet Delegation were getting restive. Since Marshal Voroshilov had put the three questions he and his colleagues had disclosed the strength and organisation of the Soviet Army and Air Force in some detail, had outlined their air policy which was similar to ours in excluding attacks on civilians, and had described three alternative plans for joint action by the British, French and Soviet forces. For their part the British and French Missions had given information about their navies and air forces and their planned use in war. In the British case this was done according to the instructions from London, though Air Marshal Burnett deliberately slightly over-stated our air strength. The French gave their information on the same lines. The three Soviet strategic plans concerned a main enemy attack westwards, a main attack eastwards on Poland and Roumania, and an attack on the U.S.S.R. through Finland and the Baltic States. The Russians assumed that they would be allowed to cross Poland and Roumania; and they raised some even more awkward points which, as things turned out, were never dealt with. Common to all of them was a Soviet demand for a strong Allied naval squadron to be sent into the Baltic. This, together with the Soviet Fleet there, must have permission to occupy, temporarily, islands and ports in the Gulfs of Finland and Bothnia and in the eastern Baltic Sea 'with the object of defending the independence of the States concerned'. Also common to all three plans was a proportional system of support described by Admiral Drax in a letter home as 'quite childish'. If the main attack was westwards the Soviet would engage on the Eastern Front forces equal to seventy per cent of those engaged directly against Germany by Britain and France: similarly, if Germany used the Baltic States for an attack on the U.S.S.R., Britain and France would commit to operations in the West forces equal to seventy per cent of the size of the Soviet forces engaged in the east, i.e. about 136 divisions and 5,500 aircraft. If the main attack was on Poland and Roumania—for this the Soviet estimated scale of ninety German divisions was much higher than ours of a maximum seventy-five—the Soviet Union would put into the field forces equal to 100 per cent of those directly engaged against Germany by the two Western Powers. In the first two cases Polish support was essential and she must deploy forty-five divisions; in the

third it was assumed that she and Roumania would use all their forces to resist attack.^{(122)*} After this Marshal Voroshilov made a number of points in answer to questions. The most important were, first, that if a military convention were concluded as result of the present negotiations, Russia would certainly help to defend Turkey. Second, both in peace and war Russia was willing to carry on trade with friendly nations and in this the supply of raw material and armaments was included: no transport difficulties were anticipated.^{(125)†} But beyond this Marshal Voroshilov would not go. On 17th August he proposed an adjournment with no date for resumption until Poland's reply was received, and then, temporarily, changed his mind. But at the resumed meeting on the 21st, still with no news from Poland, the Conference adjourned *sine die*.

The view of the British Delegation at this point was that there was no certainty of a military agreement even if Poland yielded: the Russians might then raise other difficulties.⁽¹²⁸⁾ The French were rather less pessimistic. It appears—and the evidence is to some measure contradictory—that they not only pressed the Poles hard for a helpful reply but even made moves which implied that they would reply in Poland's name if the Polish Government continued to be difficult. Lord Halifax clearly thought the French were taking too much upon themselves and refused their request to do likewise.⁽¹²⁹⁾

At all events the outcome is beyond dispute. On the 22nd Marshal Voroshilov—at a meeting at which there were no British representatives—refused to accept any undertaking about Polish action unless it came from Poland herself.⁽¹³⁰⁾ A few days later Russia signed an agreement with Germany and negotiations with France and Britain were broken off. Subsequently Marshal Voroshilov carefully explained that the new pact was not the reason why the talks with France and Britain had come to an end; it was signed 'because among other reasons conversations had reached deadlock'.⁽¹³¹⁾

* The British Delegates differed about the importance of the Soviet demands relating to the Baltic. The Air Marshal and the General—and apparently General Doumenc as well—thought a compromise possible: the Admiral anticipated trouble.⁽¹²³⁾ The British Minister in Finland had already warned that Soviet action against islands in the Gulf of Finland would very probably lead the Finns to accept German help; after the J.P.S. had discussed this, the Delegation was told, if the Russians raised the subject, to try to dissuade them from any infringement of neutrality.⁽¹²⁴⁾

† Other questionnaires about naval operations on the Eastern Front⁽¹²⁶⁾ do not seem ever to have been answered. Later at a press conference Marshal Voroshilov stated that the supply of raw materials and armaments was a commercial matter hinging on no other agreements.⁽¹²⁷⁾ On 2nd September the Soviet Ambassador asked Colonel Beck why he had not taken the hint. The Polish riposte was delayed because of communication difficulties after the German attack, and was rebuffed by M. Molotov because, he said, the Anglo-Polish declarations of war had created an entirely new state of affairs.

Table 22

Estimates of Armed Strengths—European Powers and Japan—
Summer, 1939

There were two major attempts to estimate the strength of Soviet Armed forces in the last months of peace. First, during the Anglo-French Staff Talks and then for the British Military Mission in Moscow. On the whole they vary little, but presumably the latter should be taken as the last word. In the case of the Soviet Army and Air Force, the Military Mission was supplied with comparisons with those of other powers, except for Japan which was excluded from their terms of reference. In the case of the Navy, the Mission was given only Soviet strength. It seems more useful, however, to present as comprehensive a picture as possible, so in the following tables I have included the Far East and the chief navies as well, using as sources for these the figures compiled for the Anglo-French Staff Talks. Apart from this, all the other figures are from the Military Mission's directive:⁽¹³²⁾ if these vary much from the earlier ones, the latter are shown in brackets.

NEGOTIATIONS WITH SOVIET UNION, 1939 759

1. Fleets

| | British Empire | France | Germany | Italy | Soviet Union | | | | | Japan |
|-------------|----------------|--------|---------|-------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|-------|-------|
| | | | | | Baltic | Northern | Black Sea | Far East | Total | |
| Battleships | 12 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 2 | | 1 | | 3 | 19 |
| Cruisers | 54 | 50 | 8 | 22 | 5 | | 7(4) | | 12 | 72 |
| Destroyers | 145 | 40 | 50 | 126 | 27 | 21(15) | 22 | 17 | 87 | 185 |
| Submarines | 54 | 80 | 57 | 105 | 53(59) | 19 | 48(42) | 70 | 190 | 134 |

Notes:

1. Although comparisons were not made specifically, the Military Mission was told the Soviet Baltic Fleet was probably little inferior numerically to the German. But, while individual efficiency was reasonably good, organisation and staff work in the Soviet Fleet was poor, with the submarine arm probably the best. Dockyard misorganisation was such that refitting programmes were often not completed and this, allied to the general chaos in heavy industries, would probably result in a much smaller proportion of ships being available for active service on mobilisation than would be the case with other Powers.
2. In the Mission's directive, there are details of the facilities and the state of defences at the main Russian naval bases.

2. Armies (Divisional Strength)

| Britain | France | Poland | Roumania | Germany | Italy | Hungary | Soviet Union | | | Japan |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|-------------------------|---------|------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------------------|
| | | | | | | | Europe | Far East | China | Manchukuo and Japan |
| 16 | 86 (excl. North Africa) | 40 + 59 inf. Bns and 11 Cav. Bdes | 25 | 120-30 | 40 (excl. North Africa) | 14-21 | 62 + 3 mech. corps | 37 | 29 + 2 bdes | 19 + 2 bdes |
| 16 later | | | | | | | 120-30 + 4 mech. corps later | | | |

Notes:

1. The Soviet totals were both considerably less than the estimates at the time of the Allied Staff Talks. The reason is the exclusion from these new figures of those troops normally stationed in Central Russia.
2. A mechanised corps was roughly the equivalent of our light armoured division.
3. Soviet equipment was noteworthy more for its quantity than quality, being still largely on a horsed basis. Tanks, totalling some 9,000 were good but only lightly armoured. The fire power of Russian artillery was low though improving: and with the exception of A/A, few artillery weapons were of modern design.
4. The Soviet figures given at the Moscow talks on the whole tally fairly well with our estimates. The total number of divisions to be deployed on their Western Front was 120 infantry and sixteen cavalry divisions and 9,000-10,000 tanks: these did not include garrisons of fortified areas, coast defence units, depot troops, etc. An infantry division comprised three rifle and two artillery regiments and had a war strength of 19,000 men. A corps consisted of three infantry divisions and had its own two regiments of artillery. The concentration of the Army required eight-twenty days, but the Soviet Delegation did not say whether all 136 divisions would be immediately available. They gave their transport arrangements quite a build-up.⁽¹³³⁾

3. Air Forces

| | Long-range Bombers | Short-range Bombers | Fighters | AC and GP | Naval Co-operation | Total |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|----------|-----------|---|-------|
| Britain Metropolitan (mobilisable) | 576 | | 624 | 108 | 432 (including 210 FAA) | 1,750 |
| France Metropolitan | 300 | 72 | 403 | 324 | 135 | 1,234 |
| North Africa and Levant | 106 | 37 | 96 | 141 | 40 | 420 |
| Germany | 1,750 | 365 | 1,175 | 635 | 285 | 4,210 |
| Italy Metropolitan | 480 | | 459 | 252 | 340 | 1,531 |
| Libya and Dodencanese | 81 | | 90 | 81 | 9 | 261 |
| East Africa | 138 | | | 18 | | 156 |
| Spain | 180 | | 230 | 60 | 30 | 500 |
| Poland | 40 | 170 | 160 | 100 | 30 | 500 |
| Roumania | 24 | 9 | 63 | 115 | 9 | 235 |
| Russia West of Lake Baikal | 894(990) | 217 | 983 | 1,066 | 201 | 3,361 |
| East of Lake Baikal | 216 | | 341 | 469 | | 1,026 |
| Japan | 208 | 418 | 429 | 189 | 99 (excluding ship-borne aircraft) | 1,343 |

Notes:

1. As usual our air striking force was estimated on a basis comparable to Germany in the matter of reserves and for this reason it is misleading to compare it with, for instance, France and Italy whose reserves were very much less: actually our total first-line bomber strength was 916.

2. About half the Russian bombers in the West were of reasonable performance, fighters were more limited by radius of action. Because of lack of organising ability and indifferent organisation in the aircraft industry, it was unlikely that any increase of production in war would be possible.

3. According to the earlier estimates, Soviet reserves were some 50 per cent.

4. The Soviet figures for their Western Air Force were 5,000-5,500 first-line aircraft, 80 per cent of which were modern. The proportions were 55 per cent bombers, 40 per cent fighters and 5 per cent Army co-operation. Their factory output was 900-950 aircraft a month excluding training and civil aircraft. All of which is higher, of course, than our estimates. Air Marshal Burnett recorded his disbelief in the production figures which he thought a 'gross exaggeration', but he did not comment on the others.⁽¹³⁴⁾

SOURCES

| | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------|
| (1) D.B.F.P. Third S., Vol. V: Nos. 42, 166; No. 176 is a slightly longer version of the second interview | 720 |
| (2) Ibid., No. 181 | 721 |
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| (10) D.B.F.P. Third S., Vol. V: No. 282 | 723 |
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- (58) Ibid., No. 94 737
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- (61) Ibid., No. 103, para. 18 738
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PART IV
CHAPTER XX
DEFENCE AND THE MACHINERY
OF GOVERNMENT

1. *The Committee of Imperial Defence*

FOR MANY PEOPLE, some at the time and more since, the nineteen-thirties were the 'locust years' when Britain became too involved in her own affairs and, in the process, sacrificed the opportunity to maintain her world influence in such a way that war might either have been avoided or, at the least, made briefer and more quickly decisive when it came. Criticism of the MacDonald, Baldwin and Chamberlain governments has been levelled both at what they tried to do and the ways in which they did it. At the time, and rather more then than since, critics saw in that part of the machinery of government which was concerned with defence the basic cause of unsatisfactory policies.

Throughout the inter-war years the Cabinet depended for advice in matters of grand strategy on the C.I.D. and on that Committee's constantly expanding growth of sub-committees.⁽¹⁾ After two or three years of working on an informal basis after 1919 the C.I.D. settled down from 1923 onwards to a more regular pattern. The Prime Minister once more normally acted as chairman, the Committee comprised all those Ministers directly concerned with defence and with its planning at a grand strategic level and, to cope with a widening range of business, a series of branches of subject committees grew outwards from the parent tree. The separate parts of this organisation do not seem to have been constructed according to one plan from the beginning but, when completed, did in fact fit into each other in such a way as to present a fairly coherent scheme for the preparation of defence plans in a national war. The Admiralty, the War Office and the Air Ministry each had a Board or Council, and this Board was presided over by the Minister at the head of the Department. In each Service the Chief of Staff was responsible for advice on matters of policy, strategy and plans. The second professional member dealt with matters relating to personnel, the third and fourth professional members were responsible for the different branches of construction, ordnance, supplies and transport. The

C.I.D. was comparably organised from 1924. It was presided over by the Prime Minister, whose position corresponded to that of the political head of a Service Department, the Committee itself corresponding to the Board or Council. The Chiefs of Staff group of Sub-Committees corresponded to the first professional member; the Manpower Group to the member for personnel; the Principal Supply Officers Organisation to the third and fourth professional members. To complete the analogy between the organisation of the C.I.D. and that of a Service Department, there was an Imperial Defence College, set up in January 1927⁽²⁾ for the training of officers and civilian officials in the broadest aspects of Imperial strategy. Just as the Staffs of the Service Departments were normally recruited from the graduates of Staff Colleges, so, it was hoped, the holders of posts working in close association with the C.I.D. would consist, to a considerable extent, of graduates of the Imperial Defence College.

In addition to this more formal structure the C.I.D. hived off a number of top level *ad hoc* committees, composed of Ministers and their senior professional advisers, charged with some specific duties and usually on a temporary basis. For example, as we have seen, in the autumn of 1933 a Defence Requirements Sub-Committee was appointed to prepare a programme for meeting our worst deficiencies, for transmission to the Cabinet. The Report of the Sub-Committee was referred to a Ministerial Committee on Disarmament. This Ministerial Committee was later renamed the 'Ministerial Committee on Defence Requirements', and, in July 1935, was reconstituted as the 'Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on Defence Policy and Requirements'.⁽³⁾ By its terms of reference it was 'To keep the defensive situation as a whole constantly in review so as to ensure that our defensive arrangements and our foreign policy are in line'. Shortly after this rearrangement the Mediterranean crisis became acute and the D.P.R. Committee undertook, under the authority of the Cabinet, the general supervision of defence arrangements, functioning in all respects as a War Committee and ready to take over Supreme Control if war should break out. Its Chairman was the Prime Minister, and its membership was almost the same as that of the C.I.D. itself, which it temporarily superseded.⁽⁴⁾ After the crisis the D.P.R. Committee sat normally under the chairmanship of the new Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, and now became concerned largely with the supervision of the defence programmes, principally in their supply aspect.

In January 1937 the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee submitted a Report to the C.I.D. in which they advocated the setting up of a small Ministerial Committee to examine all plans for a major war

from the point of view of Government policy, and to provide the nucleus of a War Committee or War Cabinet.⁽⁵⁾ These recommendations were approved,⁽⁶⁾ and Mr. Baldwin then appointed a Standing Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. on Defence Plans (Policy), composed as follows:

The Prime Minister (Chairman).
The Chancellor of the Exchequer.
The Secretary of State for Home Affairs.
The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.
The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence.
The First Lord of the Admiralty.
The Secretary of State for War.
The Secretary of State for Air.⁽⁷⁾

The new committee, in practice, took over the original functions of the D.P.R. Committee insofar as they concerned plans, so that there were now three top-level committees,

The C.I.D.,
The Sub-Committee on Defence Policy and Requirements,
The Defence Plans (Policy) Sub-Committee,

all, to some degree, independent of each other, and yet all dealing with defence questions with no clear line of demarcation between them. There was a good deal of overlap, and one committee sometimes took work which more properly belonged to another. Therefore, towards the end of 1937 it was arranged that the D.P.R. and the D.P.(P) Sub-Committees should be re-absorbed into the C.I.D. so that all meetings would take place under the title of C.I.D. meetings.⁽⁸⁾ In fact what happened was that the C.I.D. and D.P.R. personnel now met normally on alternate Thursdays, the agenda of meetings being arranged accordingly, while the D.P.(P) body, with a much more restricted membership, met only occasionally to consider plans and remained the body which, it was assumed, would assume Supreme Control in War when occasion arose. Although the most obvious change was largely one of nomenclature, the resultant convenience in preparing Agenda, and in filing and in indexing papers, not only made the records of these committees easier to use but also enabled the Secretariat, by a more correct allotment of business, to separate their functions more clearly. This, however, did not stop the process of hiving off specialist sub-committees of the C.I.D., at the top level. For example, in February 1939, a meeting of the C.I.D. with its Defence Plans (Policy) representation, received a major study from the Chiefs of Staff entitled 'European Appreciation 1939-40'. That paper was then referred by the C.I.D. to a specially appointed *ad hoc* sub-committee

known as the Strategic Appreciation Sub-Committee which adopted a supervisory function on the activities of the British delegation to the Anglo-French Staff talks and developed its own series of papers in consequence.^{(9)*}

For many people it was this flexibility of the C.I.D. in responding to new, and often temporary needs, which constituted one of the main advantages of the committee system. Others doubted whether time was saved or work done more efficiently when so many of the same Ministers and officials were involved all the time, whatever the name of the Committee on which they sat as members.

One last point concerning plans for supreme control in war before turning to consider the views of those who were dissatisfied with the C.I.D. In April 1938, rather more than a year after the Defence Plans (Policy) Standing Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. was set up to provide, among other things, a possible nucleus of a War Cabinet or Committee for war-time, the Chiefs of Staff made further proposals. They pointed out that in time of war present plans would now provide the Government with machinery for the ministerial direction of grand strategy through the D.P.(P) Committee, and with machinery providing co-ordinated advice on the general military conduct of the war through its Chiefs of Staff Committee. On the other hand, there was no provision for co-ordination of day-to-day operations in war, nor had that matter so far received much attention. The Chiefs of Staff then went on to argue that 'there must obviously be some machinery whereby the Chiefs of Staff or their Deputies or Directors of divisions, can arrive rapidly at decisions requiring immediate joint action either for meeting a situation of emergency or in pursuance of an agreed plan of campaign'. What was wanted, in other words, was an organisation which would allow each Service Ministry to control the operations of its own Service and yet provide for co-ordination between all three and also the Civil Air Defence organisation. The solution proposed was a Combined Operational-Intelligence Centre, or Central War Room, centrally situated so that it would be close to all the Ministries concerned. It would be fully equipped with maps and charts and would be linked by specially protected telephone circuits to the separate War Rooms of the Service Departments and any other Ministries directly concerned.⁽¹⁰⁾

When the C.I.D. discussed this paper early in May they did so with approval and also carried its recommendations further. Ministers were concerned about the problems of passive defence and, in particular, about the problem of establishing an executive chain of command among the various civil authorities concerned in

* See above, p. 514.

defence measures in time of War. The C.I.D. therefore, while approving the recommendations of the Chiefs of Staff, also set on foot an enquiry into the problems just mentioned, instructing the Deputy Chiefs of Staff, thereafter, to consider methods of co-ordinating civil and military control. In addition, the Deputy Chiefs of Staff were to initiate, 'forthwith . . . an enquiry into the most suitable location and layout for the Central War Room'.⁽¹¹⁾ From these instructions there developed the War Room beneath the Cabinet Office made famous during the war by Mr. Churchill and his staff.

2. *The Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence: the Chiefs of Staff Committee*

Dissatisfaction with the way in which the C.I.D. worked led to three major Parliamentary debates, one in March 1928, the next six years later, and the third two years later still.⁽¹²⁾ It was certainly not the case that all of those who wanted reform—and they were to be found in all political parties—wanted the same changes and for the same reasons. But the critics could, broadly speaking, be divided into two groups—those who wanted a formal centralisation of power through an executive Minister with his own staff and department, and those who wanted simply more co-ordination through a new Minister without a department of his own who would continue to work through the C.I.D. but giving it greater cohesion and efficiency. Common to both groups was the conviction that the Prime Minister needed a deputy in defence matters since it was impossible for the Prime Minister himself to find time to exercise the degree of daily control, or even co-ordination, that was needed. The Prime Minister was not to be superseded; he was to be helped. Again, nearly all critics were on common ground in believing that day-to-day administrative problems tended too often to cloud judgment on issues of grand strategy and that only a new Minister could provide the necessary inspiration from above. Finally, all were agreed that new methods of warfare, and the near certainty that the next war would involve the whole nation and not only its fighting men, demanded a degree of integrated planning which could not be achieved without some change in the existing machinery of government.

Within the Government most Ministers and their professional advisers wanted less change rather than more, and they had a powerful and central figure on their side in the person of Sir Maurice Hankey who for years had been Secretary both of the Cabinet and of the C.I.D.⁽¹³⁾ Hankey was, and remained, convinced that the flexibility of the existing purely advisory committee system, together

with traditional Ministerial responsibility for action, could provide all that was needed.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is therefore hardly surprising that when a change came it was deliberately conservative in intention and proved to be equally so in effect.

What the general arguments of critics failed to bring about was achieved by an awareness, within the Cabinet, of the shortcomings of the present system as shown up both by the Abyssinian crisis, and by the problems of the major rearmament programme arising from the third report of the D.R.C. In February 1936 the Prime Minister announced the appointment of Sir Thomas Inskip as Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, explaining that—

‘As there appears to be no likelihood of any diminution in the other demands upon the time and attention of the Prime Minister, it has become clear in the course of a thorough investigation of the whole problem that, for the time being at any rate, he must have some special assistance in regard to defence matters.’⁽¹⁵⁾

The new Minister was to be the Prime Minister’s deputy on the C.I.D. and the D.P.R.C., to be chairman of the Principal Supply Officers Committee, and to act in close concert with the Chiefs of Staff, if necessary as chairman of their own committee.

Insofar as the new Minister was intended to give the hard pressed Prime Minister some relief then the new arrangement was a success. Insofar as it was designed to put new life and a sense of urgency into the whole organisation and activity of the C.I.D. it was, if not a failure, then certainly not a great improvement. Possible alternatives to Inskip were Sir Samuel Hoare and Mr. Winston Churchill. The former was judged to have shown bad taste in his obvious desire to return to office so soon. Churchill was too much of a firebrand and liable to cause friction with the Chiefs of Staff and Service Ministers.⁽¹⁶⁾ If Inskip was ‘not inspiring’⁽¹⁷⁾ at least he was safe and a man of sound judgment who would fit in with the Chiefs of Staff. Certainly there is no evidence that Inskip caused friction. On the other hand his undoubted talents were enlisted largely because he was expected to fit into the system as it was and not because he would change or even adapt it. He became, and particularly from the summer of 1937 onwards, virtually a deputy to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for defence expenditure, imposing on that expenditure the pattern of thinking which the Prime Minister and the Chancellor already shared. Since financial and economic stability was our fourth arm of defence, then defence planning must be tailored to fit what the Treasury thought could be spent. Once the inevitable choices had to be made, and priorities established, then those preparations which most obviously catered for Britain’s own defence were put

first without questioning whether they were identical with the preparation for an alliance strategy despite the hardening assumption that we would not be engaged in a major war without allies. Inskip stamped yet more firmly on defence programmes the qualities they largely possessed already; his intellectual abilities were used more to justify conclusions already reached than to question them in order to reach better ones.*

One issue of very great importance constantly included in the general debate about defence organisation was the efficiency of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. When the Salisbury Committee in 1923 carried out its enquiry into the adequacy of existing machinery for the conduct of National and Imperial Defence it rejected any suggestion of a co-ordinating Ministry. On the other hand the committee did admit that, in its view, 'the existing system of co-ordination by the Committee of Imperial Defence is not sufficient to secure full initiative and responsibility for defence as a whole and requires to be defined and strengthened.'⁽¹⁸⁾ Initiative, it was pointed out, lay with the Prime Minister and Departments, and no authority except the Prime Minister—and he had too little time to give to defence questions—was responsible 'for the initiation of a consistent line of policy directing the common action of the three or any two of the three Services, taking account of the reactions of the three Services upon one another'. The Salisbury Committee therefore recommended that there should be a deputy to the Prime Minister as chairman of the C.I.D. and that he, in turn, should be helped by the three Chiefs of Staff; the latter, additional to their purely Departmental rôle should have 'an individual and collective responsibility for advising on defence policy as a whole, the three constituting, as it were, a Super-Chief of a War Staff in Commission'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Out of this recommendation came the Chiefs of Staff Committee.† The C.O.S. Committee was then reinforced by a Joint Planning Sub-Committee set up in 1927 and by a Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee in 1936.

In the early nineteen-thirties many of the critics of the existing machinery for co-ordination of defence argued that the C.O.S. Committee had not adequately carried out the tasks for which it had been appointed. There could be no doubt that the Committee had provided the Cabinet, via the C.I.D., with a steadily increasing volume of strategic appreciations, whether on specific subjects such as the proposed Geneva Protocol or in preparation for the international naval negotiations of 1927 and 1930, or in general appreciations in their annual reviews. Moreover, in their annual reviews in 1932 and 1933 the Chiefs of Staff had deliberately taken the

* See above, Part III, Introduction and Chapter VIII.

† Technically as a Sub-Committee of the C.I.D.

initiative in drawing the attention of Ministers to the inadequacy of Britain's defence preparations in face of a belligerent Japan and a newly rearming Germany. Further, from the autumn of 1933 until that of 1935 they had worked together with the permanent heads of the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office to draw up the deficiency and then the armament plans which, to a large extent, provided the framework for Britain's defence preparations until the outbreak of war. Asquith's Cabinet had certainly not been provided with systematic military advice on that scale.

The critics of the Chiefs of Staff Committee did not deny all this. Their common criticism was that the system failed to provide objective views when painful choices had to be made and that, as a result, there was a refusal to face up to the relative importance of the rôles of the three Services and of their claims on the country's resources.⁽²⁰⁾ This was not a criticism made only by civilians. In a letter to *The Times* Lord Trenchard, formerly first Chief of the Air Staff, complained because, although the Chiefs of Staff Committee did valuable work in providing high-level inter-Service consultation in emergency and day-to-day matters, it did not explore still less solve the larger problems of national and imperial defence; unanimity was too often reached by tacit agreement to exclude controversy and to restrict the scope of advice to matters on which compromise was possible.⁽²¹⁾ *The Times* itself put the same point in another way when claiming that the present organisation lacked the means to decide on and effect a scientifically calculated redistribution of men and weapons to meet the needs of modern warfare, and that partly because the Chiefs of Staff Committee, anxious always to reach agreement among its own members, had by now learned the political game of give and take.⁽²²⁾

The records of the Cabinet and of the C.I.D. do not provide much direct evidence either to support or to deny these charges. Papers from the Chiefs of Staff nearly always went forward to Ministers with agreed analyses and recommendations. Nor in the records of committees with Ministers do the Chiefs of Staff normally provide us with evidence of serious differences of opinion on major strategic matters. The very occasional example of disagreement, for example over the Fleet Air Arm, is the exception which proves the rule.* But the charge that the Chiefs of Staff based their advice largely on compromises they all accepted does seem to be borne out by one basic feature of strategic planning in these years. For most of the time during the inter-war years each of the three Services appears

* The records of the Chiefs of Staff Committee itself, on the other hand, do reveal deeper divisions sometimes. For a very full record of this story see the unpublished doctoral thesis by H. G. Welch, *The Chiefs of Staff Committee, 1923-1939* in the library of King's College, London.

to have developed its own strategic thought and planning largely in isolation from the other two, content to accept the combined end product so long as independence was not threatened in the process. Winston Churchill put his finger on this during the 1934 debate in the Commons. Each of the Services, he argued, was basing its demands on the Treasury on different threats to national security: the Navy on the danger from Japan in the Pacific and on the need to protect communications with Australia and New Zealand, the Army on the protection of the North West Frontier of India, and the Air Force on 'the nearest and most probable antagonist'. From his own experience, he wrote, he was convinced that the Minister with the most persuasive powers and backed by the Department with the strongest hold in tradition usually got the largest share of available money. Somehow this must be changed, so that all three Services focussed their attention on the same dangers for the same purposes and with closely related methods for the execution of policy.⁽²³⁾

Even if Churchill must share the blame for some of this because of his own actions as Chancellor of the Exchequer, his diagnosis in the mid-thirties was very near the mark. For too long, in fact until 1939, the Admiralty held on to the dream of a major battle fleet operating 10,000 miles from home despite the great uncertainties of operations against Germany and at the cost of sacrificing a major line of communication through the Mediterranean. If the Army strove for a while to preserve the capacity to fight a major land enemy it showed, at least in top-level discussions, little anxiety to preserve that capacity once the pressure really was on. And the Air Force, with persistent single-mindedness, prepared itself for a war in western Europe with apparently little thought for operations elsewhere or for the ways in which its own efforts might be best employed in conjunction with the other two Services in fighting the nearest common enemy.

But the Chiefs of Staff were not alone to blame for this. Ministers, with very few exceptions, either accepted the views of their professional advisers or criticised them from a limited, often single Service, rather than from an overall strategic point of view. Chamberlain, who never deviated from his view that Germany was the chief danger, made some fundamental criticisms of the traditional Admiralty point of view in 1934 as well as later. Both Eden and Duff Cooper tried to oppose the 'limited liability' policy for the Army on the ground that we could hardly save France by standing aside to leave her to save herself. Other Ministers, Eyres Monsell and Swinton among them, criticised Cabinet decisions on more than one occasion but only from a single Service point of view. Otherwise the defence debate—at any rate at the top level—was a peaceful

one. Inskip was chosen as Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence precisely because he was thought to be 'safe', i.e. most unlikely to interfere with the normal working of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Neither he nor any of his colleagues stood apart from the day-to-day business of rearmament to ask whether it would be possible to conduct significant naval operations in the Pacific without the assurance of American help—at least not until within a few months of the outbreak of war. No one, at the Cabinet level, asked whether a bomber strategy made sense without the assurance of weapons known to be adequate for the job; of aircraft with the necessary operational range, able to navigate accurately, and then to aim at the target with a reasonable expectation of hitting it with sufficiently powerful bombs. Until after Munich no one other than Eden consistently asked whether it made sense to regard the security of central Europe as separate from the security of the United Kingdom even when our assumed allies, the French, clearly thought differently. If there were weaknesses in strategic thinking in the rearmament years they were as much the fault of Ministers as of those who advised them. Equally, it would be wrong to see in these years a picture of the Chiefs of Staff urging Ministers on to policies which the latter frustrated. And finally, when major changes were made in the last six months before the war, changes in strategic outlook as well as in operational plans, they were made jointly and again with no serious disagreement. If Hitler made major strategic decisions against the advice of his generals the same could not be said—for good or ill—of the British Prime Minister and his Chiefs of Staff.

Against such a background, changes in the machinery of government were likely to be, and were, largely ineffective. The independent positions of the Treasury and of the separate Service Departments were too strongly entrenched for even a Churchill to have made much difference in peace-time. Changes in strategic thinking were needed before the machinery of government would work more efficiently. And, in fairness to those who worked the machine before 1939, it should be remembered that radical changes in strategic thinking after 1950 still took many years before they were reflected in the equally radical administrative changes which developed out of the Mountbatten proposals of 1963.

3. *The Principal Supply Officers Committee: A Ministry of Supply*

There was another area of preparation for war in which the inter-departmental committee machinery of the C.I.D., with its limited advisory powers, came under frequent criticism during the inter-

war years, with the debate again centred on the contrasting merits of co-ordination by committee as against a Department of State with executive powers. That was the area of supply.

The difficulties in respect of supply experienced during the Great War were due chiefly to the unparalleled scale of demand; but important contributory causes were the facts that, during the preceding years of peace, there had been no comprehensive survey of resources or planning of production, and no provision when war broke out for interdepartmental co-operation and co-ordination of activities. The preparations of the Service Departments in 1914 were complete within the limits set to them; but those limits were narrow and the rapidity of expansion had not been foreseen. When the needs were realised the establishment of the Ministry of Munitions was the only apparent remedy. After the war the creation and development of the Principal Supply Officers Committee, as a Standing Sub-Committee of the C.I.D., represented an attempt to guard against the disorder and deficiencies of 1914-18, 'by creating a machinery and habit of constant and systematic consideration of the problems likely to arise in a future emergency and of the appropriate methods of dealing with them by co-ordinated action between the Departments. . . .'⁽²⁴⁾

In January 1924 the C.I.D. considered the Report of the Sub-Committee on the Production of Warlike Stores.⁽²⁵⁾ At this meeting it was decided that a 'Co-ordinating Committee, consisting of the principal supply Officers of the three Fighting Services, together with a Representative from the Board of Trade, should be formed . . .' This Committee was to be responsible for:

- (a) Ascertaining and maintaining a watch upon the National stocks of raw materials required in the manufacture of articles required for the three Services and the civilian population.
- (b) Preparing a list of articles, the total supply of which might be required in war-time and for making the necessary arrangements for prohibiting the export of such articles on the outbreak of war.
- (c) Preparing plans for increasing supplies in emergency whether by special purchase arrangements at home or abroad or by opening up new sources of supply. These plans would include various alternatives to meet the possibility of normal sources of supply being cut off by the nature of the war, and for
- (d) Maintaining lists of contractors additional to those employed by the Services who could be called upon during emergency or whose machinery could be diverted to war work and for adding to the available output, if necessary, by the erection of National Factories.'

This was the origin and these the terms of reference of the Principal Supply Officers Committee as part of the C.I.D. Committee organisation. In addition the C.I.D. accepted in principle the rest of the Report of the Sub-Committee on the Production of Warlike Stores, with the implication that all the other duties recommended in that Report as appropriate to the P.S.O. Committee, such as plans for control, priorities, legislation etc., fell within the Committee's terms of reference.

The Committee was reconstituted in 1927, the principal changes being the appointment of the President of the Board of Trade as chairman and the addition of Civil Service representatives.⁽²⁶⁾ It was also emphasised, on this occasion, that the work of the Committee and of its various organising bodies, since they formed part of the structure of the C.I.D. 'should remain purely supervisory'. Nor was this quality of the Committee's work to be limited to peace-time. In 1927 the accepted plans for supply in time of war were that each Service Department should retain responsibility for its own supply helped by the co-ordinating machinery of a Ministry of Material Resources and by the continuation of the peace-time committee system. In that way, normal Departmental responsibility from the design stage through to the user would remain intact.

The top-level P.S.O. committee organisation from now onwards consisted of the Principal Supply Officers Committee itself which dealt with major questions of policy; the Supply Board, which was charged with estimating the quantities and types of warlike items required, assessing the capacity of industry to satisfy these requirements, and supervising preliminary measures for industrial mobilisation in war; and the Board of Trade Supply Organisation which was concerned with raw materials together with plans for their conservation or increase in an emergency.⁽²⁷⁾ There were some developments in this organisation in the nineteen-thirties. In 1934 an Advisory Panel of Industrialists was set up 'to locate manufacturing capacity for the types and quantities of armaments not normally manufactured by the trade, but which will be required in quantity in war', and also to help with developing a 'shadow' armaments industry.⁽²⁸⁾ In 1936 the new Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence was made chairman of the P.S.O. Committee.⁽²⁹⁾ Of more interest to us here, because of its connection with the basic issue of 'advisory committee and executive ministry' arrangements is that, in April 1935, the C.I.D. approved the appointment of a whole-time chairman and a whole-time secretary of the Supply Board. At the C.I.D. meeting at which the proposal was discussed the Prime Minister stated that:

'... it was considered that a stage in the evolution of the Supply Board had now been reached extending beyond the advisory

capacity of the Committee of Imperial Defence, in a more executive sphere, and that these present appointments were necessary in order to facilitate the preparations of the Principal Supply Officers Committee Organisation. . . .⁽³⁰⁾

But it would be wrong to assume that this comment heralded a new and decisive line of official thinking about the desirability of a Ministry of Supply, as we shall see shortly.

Meanwhile it was becoming clear that some influential public opinion was hardening in favour of such a Ministry. There were several Parliamentary debates on this subject during the nineteen-thirties. In 1934 Dr. (later Lord) Addison, formerly Minister of Munitions during the First World War, asked for something akin to that Ministry to be set up in peace-time and his views were very similar to those of Mr. Churchill.⁽³¹⁾ In May 1938 Lord Mottistone, who had also held senior office in the Ministry of Munitions, made a similar plea in the House of Lords;⁽³²⁾ and, in November of that year, in the weeks after Munich when it was realised just how acute some shortages were, there was a major debate in the House of Commons.⁽³³⁾

In these 1938 debates in Parliament—debates which overflowed into the press as well—the advocates of a Ministry of Supply were not all of exactly the same mind; they varied in their views about the apportionment of responsibilities, for research and design through to production and supply, as between the Service Departments and a new Ministry. But there was some fairly common ground. Most critics of the C.I.D. committee system who wanted a new Ministry nonetheless agreed that a distinction should be drawn between the Admiralty on the one hand, with its long experience gained from dockyard administration, and the War Office and Air Ministry, on the other, with no comparable knowledge. Second, that industrialists were far better equipped than serving officers to cope with production problems and especially at a time when a great increase in supplies was essential. Third, that admitted shortages of supply in 1938 were, in fact, directly due to the almost inevitable delays and inconclusiveness of operations conducted by advising committees with no executive powers of their own.

Those who supported the existing system, like their critics, were not all entirely of one mind. But they, too, had much in common. They argued first, that the only people who could properly decide in such matters as design, numbers of items and distribution were the Service Ministers backed by their Service technical advisers; in Mr. Chamberlain's own words—'Does anybody really suppose that a Ministry of Supply can be the authority for the standardisation of destroyers, tanks and aircraft.'⁽³⁴⁾ Second, that a Ministry of Supply would interfere with normal trade and, with the compulsory

powers necessary to do its job properly, was appropriate perhaps to war but not in peace. Third, that the committee system worked as well as any other system until war had actually begun.

So far as this last point is concerned it is worth taking a brief survey of the work of the P.S.O. Committee, and particularly that of the Supply Board, down to the outbreak of war.

In 1928, in its first Annual Report, the Supply Board had laid out its work according to a plan in five stages.⁽³⁵⁾ In the Fifteenth Annual Report of the Principal Supply Officers Committee in 1938, it was pointed out that, in fact, the Supply Board would be unable to complete its programme by the date laid down by the C.I.D., i.e. the autumn of 1939.⁽³⁶⁾ By July 1939 the Supply Board had reached only the third stage of the five. The first stage, determination of priority in which various items should be examined and the second stage, an estimate of total requirements in accordance with the order of priority, had been completed. The third stage, the work of equating capacity to requirements, was still being worked on. In July 1939 the Principal Supply Officers Committee reported that 'in such conditions as now obtain, it is useless to endeavour to forecast when even the Third Stage will be completed. We can only observe that there will always be a solid core of planning not susceptible to minor changes in hypothesis, and very useful for dealing with major changes. Much of this core has already been fashioned'.⁽³⁷⁾ The fourth stage, that of the drawing up of Departmental plans on the general lines indicated by Supply Committees, and the fifth stage, the reconciling by the Supply Board of plans so prepared, still remained to be done. Naturally this affected the work of the Board of Trade Supply Organisation in its plans for raw materials. There was never time to survey the basic national requirements of raw materials in time of war in order to be able to plan the safeguarding of their supply. The first complete table of service and civilian requirements appeared a few months before war broke out,⁽³⁸⁾ but it was acknowledged that changes due to research and experiment would prevent any estimates from being final.

To return to discussions about the advisability, or otherwise, of an executive Ministry. We have already seen that, as early as the spring of 1935, the Supply Board had moved at least one step along the road to such an objective. Towards the end of 1936 the Chairman of the Supply Board, Sir Arthur Robinson, reported to the C.I.D. that he and his colleagues were unhappy about the proposed war-time arrangements put forward as long ago as 1927, and even thought that it would be desirable to set up a combined Ministry of Supply and Materials at the outbreak of war. The suggestion was not received enthusiastically by the C.I.D. and was referred to a sub-committee.⁽³⁹⁾ The sub-committee reported back a year later, in

December 1937. Its report, while accepting that Ministries of Material Resources and National Service would be set up on the outbreak of war, flatly denied the need for a Ministry of Supply. It is true that the sub-committee could correctly assume a grand strategy of limited liability and a small army equipped on a colonial scale; they also assumed, though that was a matter of opinion, that design, inspection and supply were inseparable and best left in the hands of the Service Ministries. On this basis it was argued that, provided the Deficiency programmes were completed, and provided also that the War Office and the Air Ministry completed their supply arrangements for the first year of the war, then the present committee system would remain adequate.⁽⁴⁰⁾

This whole subject came up again, this time for much more urgent consideration, after Munich. In January 1939 the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence reported to the C.I.D., as he had been asked to do, on the general production situation. In doing so he made it clear that, given present arrangements in the War Office and Air Ministry, 'further large measures of industrial mobilisation' might well have to be taken in an emergency; and that, in his view, both this situation, and pressure of public opinion, might well force the government to set up a Ministry of Supply, with full executive powers, on the outbreak of war.⁽⁴¹⁾ The C.I.D. seemed persuaded of the correctness of this advice, and the Cabinet also, though with certain reservations. But while there was general support for a war-time Ministry there was equal support for preserving present arrangements until war began.

But this last link with a long tradition was itself broken by the major developments in grand strategy which developed out of the crisis of March 1939. The doubling of the Territorial Army, followed by conscription, measures designed—whatever their immediate origin—to underline Britain's decision to make a major contribution to a continental land war, raised supply problems not seriously considered hitherto. Ministers who had previously advised against a peace-time Ministry of Supply now changed their tune, advising the immediate creation of such a Ministry to 'take over such stores of general use as may be convenient . . . and all Army supply'. The supply functions of the other Services would be taken over as considered necessary.⁽⁴²⁾ On 1st August 1939 the new Ministry of Supply was born.

Much of what has been written in this chapter so far, as in the chapters on the programmes of the three armed Services, has very often stressed what was not done, or was done only very late on in the inter-war years. It would, however, be inaccurate, as well as unfair to those who in those years were actively engaged in the Cabinet Office, the C.I.D. and the latter's interdepartmental

committees on the administrative preparations for war, to leave the matter there. To the extent that 'total war' means maximum mobilisation of human and material resources, then Britain made the transition from apparently ill-prepared peace to total war smoothly and very much more rapidly than did Germany. Britain's military expenditure, expressed as a percentage of G.N.P., was less than half that of Germany in 1938, had risen to about 80 per cent of the German total in 1939, and was a third more than that of Germany in 1940.⁽⁴³⁾ This could not, overall, have happened had Britain really been as unprepared for war in September 1939 as, from some points of view, she seemed to be.

It is not possible here even to try to apportion credit for the pre-war preparations which made possible the remarkable change just described, although the name of Sir Maurice (later Lord) Hankey would spring to most minds. What is clear, however, is that at the level of administrative planning Britain had never been better prepared for a major war than she was in September 1939.

4. *Defence Policy and the Dominions*

One aspect of consultation and planning which has not so far been considered in detail is that of the participation of the Dominions in imperial defence policy. As far back as the Imperial Conference of 1911 it had been agreed that

'... one or more representatives, appointed by the respective Governments of the Dominions, should be invited to attend meetings of the Committee of Imperial Defence when questions of naval and military defence affecting the Overseas Dominions are under consideration.'⁽⁴⁴⁾

During the years immediately before the First World War a good deal of practical use was made of that arrangement.⁽⁴⁵⁾ In the early years after the war, however, there was little opportunity to invite representatives of the Dominions to attend C.I.D. meetings. Nonetheless there were defence discussions at the Imperial Conferences of 1921, 1923 and 1926,⁽⁴⁶⁾ and Dominion representatives did attend meetings of some of the sub-committees of the C.I.D., especially the Overseas Defence Committee, when matters concerning the Dominions came up for discussion. Finally, from the time of the 1926 Imperial Conference it became normal procedure to send a selection of C.I.D. papers of broad imperial interest to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions.⁽⁴⁷⁾

There were two difficulties in the way of fuller representation of the Dominions on the main C.I.D. First was the problem of distance.

Second, in the existing state of the Commonwealth and Empire, with the main burden of defence falling on the mother country, the work of the C.I.D. was bound to be of more immediate and detailed interest to the government in London than to those in the Dominions capitals. Nearly all necessary action devolved upon Departments in London and it was difficult for the increasingly independent Dominions to be convinced that the C.I.D. was as concerned with them as it was with Britain herself.

Nonetheless a move of some importance was made in 1928. At the Imperial Conference two years earlier Mr. Baldwin gave a full account of the work of the C.I.D. when introducing the general topic of imperial defence. He quoted the resolution of 1911, and then continued:

'... I hope that, as a part of the general policy of improving our communication and consultation on matters of common interest, we may consider how far we can, in the interest of co-ordination of Defence, make further use of the elastic machinery of the Committee of Imperial Defence. So far as we here are concerned we shall certainly welcome your more frequent association and closer co-operation with the work of the Committee on all matters affecting the Dominions or the general defence of the Empire to whatever extent and in whatever manner you may consider appropriate.'⁽⁴⁸⁾

During a world tour in 1927 Mr. Amery, then Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, discussed this matter further with Dominion Prime Ministers 'on the basis that in the intervals between Imperial Conferences agenda papers of meetings ... [i.e. of the C.I.D.] might be circulated to Dominion High Commissioners who in turn should be free after considering the list of subjects on the Agenda to attend if they or their Governments thought their attendance desirable.' After some discussion an arrangement was made on these lines and the details of it circulated to the Dominion Governments in April 1928;⁽⁴⁹⁾ and, from May of that year onwards, the Dominion High Commissioners in London were invited to attend meetings of the C.I.D. except those devoted entirely to matters of domestic interest. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa made use of the new arrangement; Canada, despite repeated efforts to persuade her to join in, did not do so.⁽⁵⁰⁾

This new arrangement seems to have worked satisfactorily at first, but less so as time went on, and least of all in the two or three years before the outbreak of war. In that last pre-war period the pressure of work in the C.I.D. made it difficult to perform the necessary 'sorting out' of the agenda, while discussion of secret war plans was deliberately kept in as small a circle as possible, some of the normal

Ministerial members of the C.I.D. panel, even, being excluded.* There was, consequently, some dissatisfaction on the part of High Commissioners who felt that they sometimes missed those meetings at which matters of most importance to them were discussed. A brief analysis will illustrate what happened. Between November 1928 and July 1933, there were Dominion representatives, in varying numbers, at 18 out of 22 C.I.D. meetings. Between November 1933 and July 1937 Dominion attendance took place at 15 out of 40 meetings. And between October 1937 and June 1939 the Dominions were represented at only 14 out of 56 meetings. The proposed answer to this problem, at any rate so far as it concerned highly secret preparations for war, was that the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs should become a member of the C.I.D., D.P.(P) Panel, so that he would be in a position to explain to High Commissioners the broad outline of important decisions on war plans the detailed discussion of which they were not invited to attend.⁽⁵³⁾ War broke out, however, before this new method could be usefully experimented with.

There were, however, other methods of communication between London and the Dominion capitals which, although not specifically designed for defence, were nonetheless available for that purpose if so desired. In order to keep the Dominion Governments in touch with thinking in London on international affairs generally a routine was developed whereby they were kept informed by circular telegrams, a method which then made it possible for them to make their own views known in return. Then, as the international situation became more difficult and dangerous in the later nineteen-thirties, this arrangement was supplemented by more frequent meetings between British Ministers and the Dominion High Commissioners in London, meetings which were particularly valuable at the time of Munich.⁽⁵⁴⁾

The views of the Dominions thus ascertained were normally circulated to the Cabinet and, on the more important occasions, were specifically included in discussion at Cabinet or committee meetings. This is not to say that Dominion views always, or indeed often, were an important influence in framing British policy. It would have been impossible to accommodate their sometimes widely differing views. Indeed, on the whole, the impression is that policy was first formed in London in the hope of gaining Commonwealth

* The Dominions played virtually no part in any of the major Cabinet decisions on defence during the immediate pre-war period, for example, the establishment of a Ministry of Supply, the assumption of a European commitment for the Army, or the measures introducing conscription.⁽⁵¹⁾ They were told that Staff talks with the French were to take place⁽⁵²⁾ but took no part in them with the exception of one local conference on Pacific problems; nonetheless, the strategy evolved during these Staff talks assumed the full support of Australia and New Zealand.

support at the next stage. This seems to have been the way things were done at the time of Locarno and the way they were still being done during the Czech crisis of 1938. During the latter crisis the Secretary of State for the Dominions, Lord Stanley, expressly stated his view that the British Government should not adopt any particular policy merely because the Dominions wanted it but, bearing in mind Britain's geographical position and her wider interests, should follow whatever course was considered correct in the circumstances.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Comment on the deficiencies in communication and consultation with the Dominions should not be taken to imply that the latter were constantly pressing the British Government to be allowed a larger share in imperial defence policy. In the early stages of the process made official by the Statute of Westminster of 1931 the Dominions were normally concerned—and quite naturally—more with independence than with closer imperial association. This was the background to the rules for the conduct of foreign and defence policy originally formulated at the Imperial Conference of 1926 and holding good for the whole of the period down to the outbreak of war; the major share of responsibility was given to the United Kingdom, but with the proviso that no Dominion was committed to positive obligations without the specific assent of its own government. In the years that followed the Dominions refrained, for the most part, from any attempt to take a larger share in the formulation of policy largely because of their unwillingness to accept definite commitments. They inclined, in fact, to exercise their independence by avoiding anything that suggested a common imperial policy. As the international situation deteriorated and the influence of the League of Nations became weaker, Australia and New Zealand, it is true, did show some sign of interest in a common policy for both foreign affairs and defence, particularly during and after the Imperial Conference of 1937. In Canada and South Africa, on the other hand, there were until war broke out very strong pressures towards an attitude not merely of independence but even of neutrality.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Nevertheless, and allowing for many exceptions, the attitude of the Dominions towards imperial defence in the period dealt with in this volume was, broadly speaking, based largely on two considerations. First, a wish to see a system of collective security established under the leadership of the League of Nations. Second, and as the value of the League was increasingly questioned, a willingness—and even more than willingness—to support Britain in her attempts to ensure peace by negotiation and appeasement.

It was not surprising, given their relative military weakness, the prevailing wish for the exercise of independence and their relative

detachment from most of the power problems of the Old World, that the Dominions should have found strong political and strategic reasons to seek their own individual safety and that of the Commonwealth as a whole in a world-wide system of collective security. For a time the League of Nations became the most important factor in their external policies. 'Such foreign policy as each of them has', the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs wrote in 1936, 'is inspired principally by devotion to the League and its Covenant as the best means of maintaining peace.'⁽⁵⁷⁾ There was nothing unusually high-minded about this and it was, as with other members of the League, an attitude tempered to some degree by varying circumstances. This was made clear throughout the Italo-Abyssinian crisis of 1935-36, an issue in which the Dominions had widely differing interests and degrees of involvement. At the start, Canada and Australia were more cautious than New Zealand and South Africa about supporting League action.⁽⁵⁸⁾ In September, Mr. Bruce then representing Australia at Geneva, expressed strong anxiety about imposing economic sanctions on Italy and argued that it might be better to admit failure and 'let the League go'.⁽⁵⁹⁾ In fact, Canada, Australia and New Zealand all made it clear that they would fulfil their obligations if economic sanctions were imposed, although only South Africa came out strongly in favour of their imposition.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Divisions appeared most serious when the removal of sanctions was discussed in the summer of 1936. From the start of the discussion Australia was in favour of removal and South Africa strongly against although, in the end, all supported the League's decision.⁽⁶¹⁾ The government in London, although it took soundings, also made its own independent decision; and one Minister expressed the view that occasional differences between London and Commonwealth capitals had the advantage of demonstrating to other countries that there was no Commonwealth conspiracy.⁽⁶²⁾

The Dominions played virtually no part in the Rhineland crisis of 1936 or in subsequent discussions about proposals for future European security. After all, none of them had been signatories of the 1925 Treaty. But it does also seem that none of them were in favour of taking a strong line with Germany.⁽⁶³⁾ At the Imperial Conference in 1937 there were certainly some strong criticisms from New Zealand on the appeasement of Germany; but both South Africa and Australia took the opposite view, claiming to see in the Treaty of Versailles the basic cause of international disagreements, although they differed about the ways in which they thought it should be revised.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Moreover, it was at these meetings that Australia initiated discussion of a possible Pacific pact designed to get the Empire on to better terms with Japan.⁽⁶⁵⁾ It was during 1938, however, that broad Dominion support for Mr. Chamberlain's

policies became most apparent. In the March crisis of that year all the Dominions supported the British Prime Minister.⁽⁶⁶⁾ In September this support was even more evident. On 12th September the Dominions Secretary, Mr. Malcolm Macdonald, held the first of a series of meetings with Dominions High Commissioners, and it was at that meeting that the possibility of Britain going to war in support of France was discussed. The South African representative made it clear that his government would do everything in its power to persuade Britain not to go to war unless France was in such danger of being overwhelmed as would constitute a threat to Britain's own security. He later had two more meetings with Mr. Macdonald to urge the need for a peaceful solution of the Sudetenland problem and suggested the possibility of a plebiscite. This was a solution not seriously considered before Berchtesgaden. But both the Canadian and the Australian High Commissioners made it clear that they supported the proposal, Mr. Bruce of Australia stating that although Australia would consider a plebiscite 'an absolute outrage' it would, nonetheless, be preferable to war.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The announcement that Mr. Chamberlain was going to Berchtesgaden was hailed with delight in all the Dominions except New Zealand.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Then, during the Prime Minister's visit to Godesberg, Mr. Macdonald reported Dominion views to the Cabinet and made it clear that the High Commissioners were in favour of accepting Hitler's terms.⁽⁶⁹⁾ During the Munich conference the High Commissioners made known their view that they were anxious to press the Czechs not to be 'obstructive',⁽⁷⁰⁾ and when that conference was completed the Dominion governments, both publicly and privately, expressed their approval of the settlement.⁽⁷¹⁾ Nor should the attitude of Australia and South Africa in 1938 have been a cause for any surprise. Less than eighteen months earlier, at the Imperial Conference of 1937, Mr. Eden had said that Britain would not undertake commitments except in western Europe, even though he was unwilling to give Germany a completely free hand in central and eastern Europe where she was more likely to turn.⁽⁷²⁾ In subsequent discussion both General Hertzog of South Africa and Mr. Casey of Australia were far more dogmatic in their opposition to any involvement of Britain in eastern and central Europe arguing, in fact, that it was in those areas where some concessions to Germany might become necessary.⁽⁷³⁾ Munich followed logically. Chamberlain had no need to press for support from governments whose views tallied so closely with his own from the start.

But what if war should break out despite appeasement? Throughout the pre-war crises there was little doubt in London that Australia and New Zealand would, in those circumstances, be ranged beside Britain. The prospects concerning Canada and South

Africa, however, were not so clear. The possible neutrality of a Dominion in war was raised by the Dominions Office for the first time in December 1937.⁽⁷⁴⁾ The matter was raised again in the spring of 1938 when the War Book Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. studied the possibility of alternative plans for Dominion neutrality, the existing War Book arrangements being based on plans for a war in which the whole resources of the Empire would be involved.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The sub-committee came to the conclusion that, except for censorship, no special arrangements were possible without such practical steps as would, unavoidably and undesirably, become known to the Dominion concerned.⁽⁷⁶⁾ And so nothing was done. At the time of Munich, again, there were doubts about what Canada and South Africa would do, doubts which, in the end, were not put to the test. By the spring of 1939, however, the outlook seemed more promising. General Hertzog was reported to be coming round to the view that Hitler might soon embark on further steps of aggression which would compel South Africa to go to war at the side of the mother country;⁽⁷⁷⁾ and in Canada, although there were continuing doubts about a *casus foederis* arising from events in eastern Europe, our High Commissioner felt that there was more flexibility than hitherto in the Canadian Prime Minister's views.

As it turned out, the policies of the British Government in the spring and summer of 1939 were due neither to Dominion pressure nor to a conscious attempt to cater for Dominion views. There was a great deal of consultation at this time, and also a strong desire in London for full Dominion co-operation immediately at the outbreak of war or as soon after as possible; but policy was decided on in the hope that the Dominions would accept it, not because what was decided was already known to be acceptable to them. In the event acceptance followed, on the whole rather more quickly than some had feared.⁽⁷⁸⁾ And the reason was clear. The governments of the Dominions, in different degrees, accepted Mr. Chamberlain's argument that, at last, a stop must be put to aggression, particularly aggression in deliberate contravention of agreements freely made. For the Dominions this stand, if it involved the safety of Britain, involved their safety too. Mr. Savage, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, was no doubt more explicit than some of his counterparts elsewhere in the Commonwealth, but at any rate representative enough when he said, on 22nd May 1939:

'Let no one imagine that if Britain were involved in a general war this country could or would stand aloof enjoying undisturbed neutrality. Any attempt on our part to pursue such a policy would bring us not greater safety but greater danger. It would merely sever us from kinsmen and friends without conciliating the aggressor. We could not stand aside with arms folded

while our brethren in the British Commonwealth were fighting for their lives. Any such belief would be a dream as idle as it is unworthy of us.'⁽⁷⁰⁾

In a sense, and however late in the day, that is what the Chamberlain Government had by now said of events on the continent of Europe.

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PART IV

CHAPTER XXI

CONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH BRITAIN emerged as one of the victors from the First World War the Treaty of Versailles did little or nothing to stay that process of change in the balance of power which was to Britain's disadvantage. Increasing nationalism in former colonial areas, spreading industrialisation, and those developments which enhanced the importance of land and air as against sea-power were forces which Britain could not control, and which only underlined the delicacy of a situation in which a small island power had for so long exerted its influence and protected its interests throughout the world. Unfortunately, as it turned out, everything seemed, for a number of years, to conspire to dissuade British Governments and British people from looking ugly facts in the face. Many events on the international scene superficially appeared to promise a future which, if not the millenium, might at any rate witness a growing reluctance among nations to treat war as an instrument of policy and a growing willingness to settle differences round the conference table. In addition the worsening economic distress of the late nineteen-twenties, by focussing attention on domestic affairs, made it all the easier to be optimistic about international matters not by a process of rational analysis but in default of it.

In the inter-war years Britain had two major choices open to her as ways of maintaining her world power and her national security. The first was increasing reliance on the League of Nations. The second, some system of alliances or ententes to replace that which had grown up in the years before 1914. The first was never very likely. Whatever Mr. MacDonald and his Labour colleagues may have wanted (and that was not always clear) Conservative Ministers certainly did not want the League to be used as an instrument of compulsion by military force; and one of their strongest reasons for that view was that, in the international circumstances of the twenties and the thirties, a disproportionate military obligation would fall on Britain's shoulders were the League to be so employed. From 1923 the Chiefs of Staff took the same view and for the same reasons. Even if the Royal Navy and the Singapore base had been

in a much more advanced state of readiness in 1931-32 than was actually the case, there is no evidence to suggest that the National Government would have contemplated more active opposition to Japan. The chief anxiety of Mr. MacDonald's new Government was to avoid a war in which Britain would fight Japan in a League cause without the help of other League members. And the same was true of the Italo-Abyssinian crisis of 1935. On that occasion Mr. Baldwin and his colleagues were determined to do all that lay in their power to avoid a war against Italy without, at the very least, the help of France and, if possible, that of other Mediterranean Powers. Moreover, on both occasions the military advice tendered to Ministers fitted exactly into the pattern of their own thinking. The Chiefs of Staff had long set their faces against the assumption of world wide responsibilities through the League except where Britain's own interests were directly concerned; and they at no time changed their view. In their Review of Imperial Defence prepared for the Imperial Conference of 1937 they wrote that the apparent success of the League in the nineteen-twenties was due not to the strength of the League itself but to the weakness of possible aggressor Powers; since 1930 such Powers had achieved success because members of the League

'... cannot be relied upon to take collective military action against an aggressor State when such action conflicts with their interests or even when no interest of theirs is vitally affected. ...

Although ... collective security is no longer a reliable factor, we may still be bound through the League to assume responsibilities in connection with it notwithstanding the failure of other Powers to play their part. Collective security through the League, therefore, greatly increases our Imperial risks, and from a purely military standpoint is a serious disadvantage to an Empire that has so many vulnerable points.'⁽¹⁾

At a subsequent meeting of the C.I.D. when the Review was discussed at some length Mr. Chamberlain criticised this comment which, he said, 'did not give a correct interpretation of our League commitments'. His criticism, however, was not on the ground that the Chiefs of Staff were implying disloyalty to our League obligations but rather that their remarks 'overstressed the risks attendant upon our Membership of the League of Nations. It was most improbable that, in the future, we should again take the line that we had taken in the Abyssinian crisis; nor were we bound to take military action in support of collective security unless all the other League Powers did likewise'.⁽²⁾ Which was, after all, what the Chiefs of Staff were anxious to establish.

In other words, and whatever Hitler, Mussolini or anyone else

may have thought or said, Britain did not attempt to use the League as a means of ensuring her own security through a process of collective political and military action, and that simply because the likely result was not thought to be worth the cost. This, in turn, meant that even in the growing crisis of the spring and summer of 1939 there was still no inclination to appeal to the League nor any expression of regret that past decisions had made such an appeal virtually worthless.^{(3)*}

The problem of alliances was more complicated and, for our purposes, more relevant. There has been for between three and four hundred years a debate—even if an intermittent one—about the extent to which Britain should regard herself as part of or separate from continental Europe, and that debate has normally flared up, until the second half of the twentieth century, in periods of war or the crisis preceding war. Those on one side in this debate have argued that a major war on the continent should be regarded as an opportunity for Britain to use the separateness and independence conferred upon her by the sea to acquire overseas trade and colonies while her continental neighbours were distracted by disputes at home.[†] Others have argued that such gains would be illusory unless Britain's own insular security was guaranteed in relation to those continental Powers who might threaten her both by dominating the land areas adjacent to the Straits of Dover and the southern North Sea from which invasion forces might be deployed, and who might also establish themselves as rival naval powers as well. From the experience of those past wars certain generalisations can be made. First, that from at least the time of William III Britain has fought her great wars as a member of an alliance. Second, that until the twentieth century her contribution to alliance warfare was largely in terms of sea-power and money; and, third, that this was possible because Britain's allies in Europe were normally capable of providing most of the alliance land forces. Even if the charge that Britain fought her wars to the last German or Frenchman is true to some degree, the fact is that her allies usually expected to provide the armies and approved of Britain's contributions largely in money and ships rather than men.

If the situation had changed by the early twentieth century it had done so only for the worse. Alliances were more necessary than ever. In the Pacific threats had developed which, for the first time, cast serious doubts on the ability of the Royal Navy to continue to protect the interests of the Empire throughout the world. As a result, Britain signed an alliance with Japan in 1902. In Europe the new German

* This remains true despite the fact that there were references to the League at that time.

† See above, p. 37.

Empire posed a threat on land and at sea as great as that of France under Louis XIV and Napoleon. Moreover, Asquith and at any rate some of his colleagues in the pre-1914 Liberal Government were convinced that Germany and her allies could not be contained by France and Russia alone, and that Britain must commit herself to her allies on land as never before. The British Expeditionary Force, however 'contemptible' it may have been in comparison with vast continental armies, was far larger and much more ready for action at the outbreak of war than any British force Marlborough or Wellington had commanded. And within a year from the outbreak of war in August 1914 Britain was supporting her allies not only with the mightiest navy in the world as she had often done before, but now also with an army of continental proportions. The cost of alliance was a measure of its necessity.

The situation after the First World War, despite the appearances of a war-weary world for a decade or more, grew worse and not better, and worse in directions already established before 1914. In the Pacific Japan had ceased to be an ally by 1922 and by 1931 had become a potential enemy; moreover, in so far as her freedom of action was limited at all it was by a treaty which she was entitled to, and did eventually, denounce. In 1902 the Anglo-Japanese alliance had been an admission that the Royal Navy could not hope to fight in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Pacific simultaneously. It was even less possible to do so thirty years later. In Europe a similar worsening of familiar problems had become evident at the same time. After fourteen or fifteen years of quiescence and even conciliation Germany gradually became as menacing as she had been more than twenty years before; moreover, although she had lost her main central European ally of 1914, she had drawn closer to an apparently stronger Italy who posed her own particular problems for Britain in the Mediterranean. In other words, the European threat to Britain's national security had been revived in its familiar form while the inadequacy of her naval strength for deployment on a world wide scale had become more obvious than ever. Mr. Chamberlain warned his colleagues as early as the summer of 1934 that naval rearmament designed to make possible operations simultaneously even against Germany and Japan was beyond the country's resources, a warning which was echoed by successive governments until the outbreak of war in their consistent refusal formally to sanction naval building up to a two-power standard. Once Italy joined the list of potential enemies the situation clearly became worse. Hence, on the one hand the need to establish an order of priorities between likely theatres of operations—with possible operations against Germany always first and those against Italy and Japan alternating in second and third place; and, on the other hand

the persistent efforts to come to terms with either Japan or Italy, with the corollary, certainly from about 1935 onwards, that it was with Germany that accommodation would be most difficult. In other words, in the rapidly worsening circumstances of the nineteen-thirties Britain needed allies more than ever before unless she could buy off her potential enemies by giving way to their demands. And there were those who argued that she needed both.

Of the major Powers beside whom Britain fought during the Second World War only one, France, was seriously thought of as a potential ally during the inter-war period. At no stage were there preparations for war against the United States,⁽⁴⁾ although the Chiefs of Staff did not assume that this situation could never change. On the other hand, there was for a long time no expectation that the United States and Britain would find themselves fighting together on the same side. The effects of the naval rivalries of the early post-war period still remained to some degree as did, in some quarters, resentment at what was argued to be 'subservience' to America consequent upon the Washington Treaty and the end of the Anglo-Japanese alliance.⁽⁵⁾ Even if that feeling slowly died it still left behind it the conviction, among some if not all British politicians and military men, that the United States were 'more isolationist at heart than ever before'.⁽⁶⁾ When Mr. Chamberlain rejected Mr. Roosevelt's offer of help in February 1938 he did so as much because he and his colleagues were accustomed—rightly or wrongly—to expect nothing of the United States, as because he himself did not want to have his appeasement plans interfered with by the President. This is not to deny that there was a perceptible change in the British attitude towards the United States in the last year or so before the war, a change born of a growing realisation that anything but a very weak Pacific strategy was impossible in war against Germany, Italy and Japan combined unless the participation of the American navy could be counted on. The first signs of the policy that took shape after the outbreak of war, and particularly after Mr. Churchill became Prime Minister, were to be seen before war broke out. But it was a policy of waiting in the hope of eventual alliance, no more; and the waiting element was uppermost. In their major appreciation which formed the basis of the Anglo-French talks of 1939 the British Chiefs of Staff commented briefly that they expected the United States to 'be a friendly neutral, probably willing to modify the Neutrality Legislation in our favour, but not likely to intervene actively unless at a later stage'.⁽⁷⁾ And the subsequent joint talks did not change that assumption.

The possibilities of common action with Russia, at any rate in the last year or so before the war, were considered in rather more detail but only very late in the day, as we have seen, and then with no

useful result. In the major strategic appreciations of 1934 and 1935 Russia was barely mentioned, except as a possible threat to Japanese expansion in east Asia. In the Chiefs of Staff review of 1937 she was given more space, again in order to comment on the possible value of her help against Japan and, in addition, to point out that Britain might find herself fighting with Russia as an ally in the event of a German attack upon France or the Low Countries. But the Chiefs of Staff ended their section under this heading with the cryptic remark that it was not their 'province to comment upon the ultimate political consequences of such co-operation'.⁽⁸⁾ Two years later, in February 1939, they summed up the situation *vis-à-vis* Russia in the words:

'the Soviet Union would probably be unwilling to intervene actively except in the event of a direct threat to herself, but she may be expected to exercise a restraining influence on Japan.'⁽⁹⁾

In the interval between 1937 and 1939 not only was there no apparent increased desire for Russia's help but doubts about the value of that help had become naturally stronger because of the purges. And it was against this background of indifference and doubt that the abortive Anglo-Russian talks of 1939 took place.

Finally, France. Throughout the period from the first report of the Defence Requirements Committee down to September 1939 it was assumed not merely that there was no need for preparation for war against France but also that, in a major war, France and Britain would fight as allies. In their annual review for 1935 the Chiefs of Staff wrote:

'From the above it will be seen that the likelihood of war with France is not regarded seriously, and . . . the section of this report concerning European commitments deals with one side only of the Locarno picture, namely, the contingency of a war in which we are fighting with France against Germany.'⁽¹⁰⁾

The strategic argument on which these assumptions were based was that the security of Britain depended upon the security of the Low Countries, the security of the Low Countries depended upon the security of France, therefore if France were in danger Britain must come to her help in Britain's own interest. Given this clear argument and its frequent reaffirmation during the inter-war years one is left wondering why it was not translated into a definite commitment and plans until the last six months before the war.

There were, broadly speaking, two reasons. First, the assumption that the security of Britain and France was indivisible could not avoid carrying with it the implication that that security might, in

the end, have to be safeguarded by a continental war, and that was a possibility which few in Britain were prepared to face openly. Writing to his Minister in Berlin in May 1933, the German Ambassador in London, Herr Hoesch, commented that:

'It is interesting to observe how the anti-German attitude of all the groups here which are now so up in arms against Germany on account of her domestic politics and her alleged war spirit and militarism, at a certain point comes in conflict with England's aversion to becoming involved in a war on the Continent. Where taking a stand against Germany leads to the emergence of a serious danger of war . . . serious opposition arises here and alarm is felt that France might possibly draw encouragement for rash action from England's anti-German attitude. England will therefore, as in the past, be willing to pursue a policy of understanding providing that this is still regarded as an existing possibility on the German side. No decisions appear to have been taken as yet with respect to the opposite case.'⁽¹¹⁾

However one explains this attitude, whether on emotional grounds of revulsion against the indiscriminate slaughter of the First World War or on the more rational ground that Britain's strategy in that war was militarily the wrong one, its existence has been taken, in this volume, to be beyond dispute. It was thinly disguised by the attempt to argue, for example during the Chamberlain administration, that Britain would participate in a continental war on a specialist basis, contributing her sea and air power. But specialisation of that kind demanded more and not less commitment simply because it depended upon explicit agreement between allies. The French never explicitly agreed to alliance on such a basis nor, for that matter, did the British. Again, it was argued that the French could not be trusted and would, if given the freedom a promise of alliance implied, involve Britain against her will in 'continental adventures'. This, also, was less than reasonable since a guarantee of readiness on the day of reckoning could not, as it never can, be given without some risk. The fact is that, until the spring of 1939, British planners, civil and military alike, counted on the alliance with France without sufficiently examining its practical implications. No doubt the French were to blame in some respects. But the British were guilty of the most elementary mistake of both wanting their cake and eating it. All the admitted complexities of modern war demanded more not less preparation in peace-time; the British attitude of wait and see was no longer acceptable, even less so, in fact, than it would have been in 1914.

Second, while doubts of the kind just described were related to the cost of protecting the security of French territory by a war in western

Europe, there was even more marked unwillingness in Britain to contemplate going to war to protect French security through involvement in the affairs of her central and east European alliances. This became clear at least as early as the summer of 1925 during negotiations leading to the Locarno treaties. During those negotiations the French were reluctantly compelled to recognise that, quite apart from limitations on what Britain was prepared to promise about the Rhineland, her guarantee would also be limited to western Europe; it would not extend to Germany's eastern frontiers or to the arbitration pacts to be concluded between Germany on the one hand and Poland and Czechoslovakia on the other. It was the French rather than the British who made concessions over Locarno and there can be little doubt that M. Briand was well aware of this at the time.

Britain's attitude of non-involvement in the affairs of eastern Europe, and particularly in relation to French security plans in that area, became clear once again in discussions about an East European Pact in 1934. The British Government was willing to play the honest broker and tried to do so; but the limits on British action were clearly set from the beginning.* Nothing that was said or done, whether at Stresa or during the Rhineland crisis of 1936 or during the Anschluss crisis of the spring of 1938, made any difference to British views. France would be helped if her own territory were attacked; Britain accepted no liability if France regarded her security as threatened by attacks upon her east European allies.

The crucial test of British policy in this particular respect arose, of course, out of the threat to Czechoslovakia which was temporarily dealt with in the Munich settlement of September 1938.† Mr. Chamberlain was consistent in his views and pronouncements about this throughout the spring and summer of 1938 and, although there were some minor differences of view in the Cabinet, his colleagues overwhelmingly supported him. At no time was there any intention on the part of the British Government of going to war against Germany directly because of a German attack upon Czechoslovakia. If France became involved in such a war we might become involved ourselves, but even then only if French territory was attacked. This was made explicit in a Foreign Office memorandum prepared for the C.I.D. in April 1938,⁽¹²⁾ and later used by the Chiefs of Staff, in appreciations on planning for war with Germany written during September of that year.⁽¹³⁾ It was argued that:

'... war with Germany is most likely to occur as the result of an attempt by that country, either by tactics similar to those

* See above, pp. 133-34.

† See above, Chapter XVI, Section 6.

employed in Austria or by force of arms, against the independence of Czechoslovakia; and then only if France were to go to the assistance of the latter. We should, in that event, have no legal obligation to go to her assistance by force of arms; but, if the war should go so badly for France that the Channel ports were threatened, it would be in our interest to intervene in her defence. Also in the case of such a war Germany might, as in 1914, decide to anticipate and if possible immobilise France by taking the offensive against her. In that event we should be bound to come to her assistance under our Locarno obligations.³⁽¹⁴⁾

In the critical days between Mr. Chamberlain's first German visit to Berchtesgaden and the Munich meeting no British statement, or any Cabinet discussion, can properly be assumed to mean more than that. Even the Foreign Office view, made known on 26th September, that 'if a German attack is made upon Czechoslovakia the immediate result must be that France will be bound to come to her assistance, and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France' should be seen in that context. Moreover, even this limited commitment was certainly not an accurate statement of an agreed plan between those three countries. As late as 2nd September the Chiefs of Staff had assumed that there was 'uncertainty as to French action if some incident in the Sudeten area were to incite Herr Hitler to precipitate aggressive action in the immediate future, and as to any consequential action which His Majesty's Government might feel constrained to make'.⁽¹⁵⁾ What Mr. Chamberlain was concerned with in late September 1938 was not concessions to Germany; he had already agreed to those. He was only concerned that Hitler should take what he wanted by agreed peaceful methods and not by force. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that Britain's refusal to consider a military solution to the Munich crisis arose primarily from long-established British policy of non-involvement in the affairs of eastern Europe. Her military weakness at the time, so often and so strongly emphasised by the Chiefs of Staff, undoubtedly added a further reason for standing fast to policy already decided upon. But there is no evidence to suggest that Mr. Chamberlain and his colleagues would have changed that policy had the country's military preparations been more advanced.

What has been said so far, however, makes no attempt to answer the purely hypothetical question of whether it would, or would not, have been militarily preferable for France and Britain to go to war against Germany in September 1938 rather than a year later. The difficulty is that there are so few facts on which to base an opinion. Moreover, even what is now known about comparative military strengths makes little sense on its own; the whole range of what

Clausewitz called the 'moral forces' is just as important. If Britain and France needed a strong ally in eastern Europe then Czechoslovakia, despite the harm done to her strategic defence by the Anschluss, was probably the best. Beyond that is uncertainty. Given the available evidence it cannot be conclusively demonstrated what Poland, Hungary and Russia would have done in the event of war in 1938 and whether their intervention would have been significant. It is as reasonable to argue that Russia would have been a worthless ally, and that Hungary and Poland would have made common cause with Germany, as to claim that determination on the part of Britain and France would have formed the basis of a successful anti-German alliance.

So far as Germany and the two western Powers were concerned, it looks as though each side overestimated the strength of the other, in 1938, although not so much as is sometimes supposed. Hitler was as strongly warned of the dangers of war by his own military advisers as was Chamberlain by the British Chiefs of Staff.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Germans knew that they were unprepared for a war at sea and, while they correctly estimated that their air forces were superior to those of France and Britain, they were unaware of the by now accepted British policy of restricted air warfare. Hitler expected his West Wall defences to be proof against allied attack while his military advisers were very much less confident. What none of them knew was that allied war plans were so ill concerted that the British Chiefs of Staff had no idea, even at the height of the crisis, whether the French intended 'to stand on the defensive on the Maginot Line or to attempt an offensive across the frontier', although they did state their firm view that Germany would 'be able to spare adequate forces to hold her fortified line in the West against attack'.^{(17)*} What is certain is that Hitler correctly estimated the great reluctance of France and Britain to go to war in 1938, even though he was wrong—as has already been argued—in supposing that the reluctance, so far as Britain was concerned, was largely due to a deliberate policy of waiting for a more propitious occasion.

The crisis of March 1939 began where the crisis of September 1938 broke off, prompting a comment from a Foreign Office observer after a meeting in the Foreign Secretary's room on 14th March that 'it was agreed we must make no empty threats since we were not going to fight for Czechoslovakia any more than for Danzig, although we would fight for Switzerland, Belgium, Holland or Tunis. . . . We should not . . . regard ourselves as in any way guaranteeing Czechoslovakia'.⁽¹⁸⁾ But, as we have already seen, some aspects of this picture soon changed. Within a few weeks

* The British did not exaggerate the likely strength of German troop concentrations on the eastern frontier of France.⁽¹⁸⁾

Poland had been guaranteed and agreements concluded with Greece and Roumania, and talks were soon to be held with Turkey. The French system of eastern alliances, ruined at Munich, was now revived in a new form with Britain playing the leading rôle.

This diplomatic revolution, however, was inspired—at any rate so far as Mr. Chamberlain and most of his senior colleagues were concerned—not so much by a plan to create a military alliance against Germany as by the belief, at least the hope, that evidence of political determination would prevent further aggression. As Sir John Simon, Chancellor of the Exchequer, remarked, 'we are not preparing for war, we are constructing a peace front.'⁽²⁰⁾ And this attitude was borne out by the subsequent negotiations with Russia. During the period of these negotiations the Chiefs of Staff, although starting slowly and developing their views a careful step at a time, were nonetheless gradually becoming more interested in the possibilities of a second front in eastern Europe. Many Ministers were, however, far more concerned to persuade Germany to go about her political business in a peaceful manner than positively to threaten her with a show of force. Writing to his sisters on 3rd April, Mr. Chamberlain claimed that '... what we are concerned with is not the boundaries of States but attacks on their independence'. In other words, negotiation could still change the map. Further, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary showed, whatever may be said of some others, anxiety not to offend Germany by anything which might be interpreted as a policy of encirclement, and particularly when that involved collaboration with a politically undesirable ally.

There was a further and major difference between his policies in the summer of 1938 and those of a year later the full implications of which Mr. Chamberlain did not seem to appreciate. In 1938 he had no intention of being drawn into a war over the problems of the Sudetenland. Since British policy was to be limited to 'honest brokerage' then, logically, Britain's current military weakness was not significant. In other words, there was no discrepancy between policy and strategy. In 1939 there was. New British commitments in east and south east Europe explicitly provided for help in the event of further aggression. Moreover, as the Chiefs of Staff soon began to argue, such help could not be direct and would be of value indirectly only on the assumption that a long, unbroken eastern front could be constructed and maintained. Further, the participation of Russia was critical for that purpose even if her involvement was limited to the supply of material and warlike stores. If a policy of deterrence was to make sense then it had to be supported by credible military sanctions and material resources, and credibility demanded that Russia should take part. As Mr. Churchill put it, 'without an

effective Eastern front, there can be no satisfactory defence of our interests in the West, and without Russia there can be no effective Eastern front'.⁽²¹⁾ Arguments about Russia's military ineffectiveness in the winter of 1939-40 and her great defeats in 1941, are irrelevant in this context. These were matters which could be guessed at, but surely not known for certain in the summer of 1939. Mr. Chamberlain, however, did not accept these implications even when he became more fully aware of them. The new policy of guarantees was undertaken with only limited prior consideration of what could be done to honour it, and with virtually no consideration of how Russia might be involved. When Russia's help was discussed there is no evidence to suggest that Mr. Chamberlain ever brought himself to admit that it was essential. He made nonsense of his own policy, certainly at the military level, by willing the end but not the means.

But that is only one aspect of the problem which faced the Prime Minister and his colleagues in the summer of 1939. There was, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, the related difficulty that the governments of those countries which were to be helped by the new guarantees were at least as distrustful of Russia, and as unwilling to accept help from her as the British Cabinet was. In the end, no solution to that aspect of the problem was ever found. What is clear is that Mr. Chamberlain and most of his colleagues did not accept the argument put forward by Mr. Churchill and Mr. Eden, and by those who supported them in Parliament and the press, that the risks of common action with Russia were far less than those of acting without her, and that the 'refinements of diplomacy' served only to obscure what had become an identity of interests.⁽²²⁾ As late as mid-May Mr. Chamberlain wrote, with reference to an agreement with Russia, that 'much will depend on the attitude of Poland and Roumania. If bringing Russia in meant their running out I should think the change was a disastrous one'.⁽²³⁾ The Prime Minister did not change his mind in this respect before the outbreak of war. And if some of his colleagues were less dogmatic on this matter than he was, on balance they supported him. But surely there is much to forgive here, as there is in all truly tragic situations. One way or another eastern Europe was going to be sacrificed—either to Naziism or to Communism. For the Western Powers this was not so much a failure as a complete inability to relate means and ends.

Looking at these events from a slightly different angle, can the guarantees to Poland, Roumania and Greece also be criticised as positively provoking Hitler to indulge in further aggression? Was the guarantee to Poland, in particular, 'the surest way to produce an early explosion, and a world war'?⁽²⁴⁾ From the purely British political point of view it is difficult to see what else Chamberlain

could have done in the spring of 1939. Despite the fact that many Conservatives were entirely with the Prime Minister in preferring yet further negotiations with Germany to any commitment to Russia, the Prime Minister's claims after Munich had now so clearly been proved wrong that public opinion was moving against Hitler much more strongly than in the autumn of 1938. Some concessions to that opinion had to be made. The guarantees to Poland, Roumania and Greece were for many people sufficient evidence of a new spirit of toughness to take the immediate sting out of the attacks of the Government's critics and to reassure its supporters who were certainly not inspired by any war-mongering spirit. Had the Government not moved that far it might just possibly have been in trouble.

What is more important in this connection, however, is the history of Hitler's views about Poland and that hardly suggests that the actions of the British Government in March 1939 provoked him to responses he had never contemplated before. As early as 24th October 1938 the Poles were presented with a German proposal that Danzig should be returned to the Reich and that the latter should be given extra-territorial concessions across the Corridor. From the beginning it seems that Hitler hoped to achieve his aims peacefully—as he always had done—perhaps with some bargaining over concessions to Poland; equally, Poland made it clear that she could not accept the union of Danzig with Germany and that view remained unchanged until war broke out. Throughout the winter talks, if not exactly negotiations, continued and came to a head again in March 1939, shortly after the German seizure of the rump of Czechoslovakia. On 21st March 1939 Herr Ribbentrop discussed once more the twin subjects of Danzig and the Corridor with the Polish Ambassador in Berlin and, again, the Poles made it clear that what Germany wanted was not what Poland could give. Moreover, these negotiations were not disclosed by the Polish Government to the British Cabinet and can in no way be adduced as a reason for the British guarantee of 31st March. On the other hand, it is true that Hitler instructed his military advisers only three days later, on 3rd April, to draw up a plan for the invasion of Poland with 1st September as the earliest date when such a plan might be put into operation; to that extent the British guarantee and German military plans can be seen as cause and effect. But to interpret events in that way is to imply that in face of continued Polish unwillingness to give way over Danzig Hitler would have continued to negotiate peacefully. Like any potential aggressor he would undoubtedly have prepared to get what he wanted by peaceful means; and since it takes at least two parties to make a war then he who defends himself, in this case Poland guaranteed by Britain, can always be accused of

causing hostilities. But it is the would-be aggressor who creates the need for defence. And it is difficult to believe that Hitler was willing in the long-term to forgo his plans for Danzig and the Corridor, perhaps even for Poland as a whole, to the point where resistance could no longer reasonably be expected.

Writing many years later about the inter-war period and particularly the policies of appeasement, Lord Swinton commented that while it had become 'fashionable . . . to heap all the responsibilities for the outbreak of war on Baldwin and Chamberlain [as] the guilty men who joined in a conspiracy of silence and deception in order to hold on to power', in his view the 'reality was that they represented the mood and spirit of the inter-war age, nothing more and nothing less'.⁽²⁵⁾ That view, behind the detail of strategic plans and decisions, is the theme of this volume.

The thread of appeasement runs throughout British policies in the inter-war years. And it was not confined to any one political party or professional group. It was evident at least as early as the Locarno Treaty, it inspired a great deal of British words and actions during the Geneva Disarmament Conference, and although it seemed to weaken at times during the Italo-Abyssinian war it was back at full strength in the Rhineland crisis of 1936. Individuals who were later prominent in opposing specific appeasement contributed to its growth as a general attitude earlier on. In the nineteen-twenties Mr. Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was in the forefront of those who demanded economy in the programmes of the armed forces, not only on financial grounds but also because war was argued to be virtually unthinkable; it was Churchill, too, who developed the operation of the restrictive Ten Year Rule to its furthest extent. Moreover, in the early nineteen-thirties he seemed more anxious about new policies in India than about the emergence of a new threat from Japan. Mr. Eden, who became Foreign Secretary on the crest of what could in some respects be called an anti-appeasement wave, was just as prepared as were his Cabinet colleagues to try to find a way back to normal relations with Italy, and he was in no way different from them in restraining the French when Germany effected her military re-occupation of the Rhineland. Only two Ministers resigned in the last years of peace over what could properly be called appeasement issues. There were others who grumbled behind the scenes, but they did little more and earned no praise even from one observer who, in general, sympathised with their views.⁽²⁶⁾ And immediately after Munich when Mr. Duff Cooper resigned, the same observer, Oliver Harvey, commented that he doubted whether other Ministers would have the courage to follow his example.⁽²⁷⁾ No other senior Minister had.

In the Conservative party as a whole the picture was not very

different. Not until Munich was there any indication of serious disagreement over the Government's policies. Even then, only a handful of Conservative M.P.s voted against Mr. Chamberlain, and in the constituencies many of those who opposed the Prime Minister found themselves questioned by local party organisations.⁽²⁸⁾ In fact the party inside and outside the House agreed with one M.P., often a critic of Mr. Chamberlain, when he said later that 'Munich was something to be profoundly grateful for, and I agree with the Prime Minister that it is nothing to be ashamed of'.⁽²⁹⁾ By the early spring of 1939 many of the wounds were healed, only to be opened again by the events of March 1939, the new guarantees and the problem of reaching an agreement with Russia. The last issue widened the gap between the Government and its opponents in the Conservative party more than ever before. But, even so, there was no break. The leaders of the Conservative opposition did not always find it easy to act together, and Mr. Eden, to the end, was most unwilling to commit himself to any irrevocable step. Meanwhile the party as a whole, whatever its intermittent criticisms, continued to support the Prime Minister and not least in his doubts about the desirability of coming to terms with Russia.

Within the Labour party there was no more consistency, not least because there was a basic contradiction between Labour's opposition to appeasement of Fascist dictators on the one hand and its repeated opposition to the Government's rearmament plans on the other. For much of the inter-war period the Labour party identified themselves much more actively than did the Conservatives with advocacy of the League as an arbiter in international disputes. The League of Nations, however, had no military resources other than the armed forces of its individual members; and yet the Labour opposition repeatedly denounced the rearmament programmes of the Government as purely 'national' and bound 'inevitably' to lead to war.⁽³⁰⁾ There were others who thought differently—notably Hugh Dalton, Sir Walter Citrine and, in the T.U.C., Ernest Bevin. Indeed, in the Defence Debate of 1936 Mr. Dalton's anger seemed directed more against some members of his own party than against the Government, forcing him to the comment that:

'We are unfit to govern! "He who darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge" abounds among us. Everyone is jealous of everyone else's status. The Party won't face up to realities. There is still much mere anti-armament sentiment, and many more agin' our own Government than agin' Hitler. Pretty desperate!' ⁽³¹⁾

The pacifism of Mr. Lansbury was, perhaps, never really very widespread. But it showed itself as late as the spring of 1937—

though admittedly in the guise of the language of class war—when Sir Stafford Cripps urged that refusing to make armaments was the only way ‘to keep this country out of war and obtain power for the working class’.⁽³²⁾

During 1937, however, the efforts of Mr. Dalton and his friends, increasingly supported by the new party leader, Mr. Attlee, began the process of ‘educating’ the Labour party to the belief that national armaments were necessary for an effective foreign policy; a process which was, no doubt, helped on by the circumstances of the Spanish Civil War. This new trend then became explicit in a party Statement of International Policy and Defence issued on 3rd September, in which it was admitted that, while a strong League of Nations was fundamental to world peace, there could be no reversal of current rearmament programmes until the international situation had been changed.⁽³³⁾ From Munich onwards the Labour opposition was normally in line with Mr. Eden and Mr. Churchill in fighting appeasement. But while the attacks of the latter upon the Government were open to the charge of disloyalty to the party and its leader, Labour attacks suffered from their own virulent personal denigration of the Prime Minister and from their accusations of class conscious policies.⁽³⁴⁾ It is true that the Prime Minister had no more love for his Labour opponents than they had for him; but it was weakening rather than aiding the cause of those who opposed appeasement to base these attacks so obviously upon hatred that had grown from quite different events. In any case, if Mr. Chamberlain’s policies really were motivated by class consciousness it is difficult to see why he should have preferred Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini to Mr. Attlee and Mr. Dalton.

While the governments of Mr. Baldwin and Mr. Chamberlain were thus well able to withstand political attacks upon their appeasement policies since those policies were so widely supported inside Parliament and by the public at large, it is also true that those governments were, for the most part, confirmed in their opinions and actions by the views of their military advisers. This point has already been discussed in several contexts in this volume and needs only a brief summary here. In the nineteen-twenties the Chiefs of Staff argued consistently against the acceptance of new commitments under the auspices of the League. During the nineteen-thirties they argued as consistently that they could not foresee a time when this country could hope to fight against its three potential major enemies simultaneously, urging the Government to come to terms with one or more of them. Moreover, since they argued as consistently against concerting plans with possible allies, the Chiefs of Staff—at any rate implicitly—strengthened the military argument for appeasement by advocating virtual isolation. This is not said in

order to condemn them, but simply in order to emphasise that appeasement was deep-rooted in British thinking and was repeatedly justified on military as well as political grounds. Those whose professional purpose it was to strengthen Britain's defences were as much in favour of conciliation for reasons of their own as were those who either disapproved of armaments altogether or who, while admitting the need for armaments, refused to face the unpleasant circumstances in which they might have to be used.

If we turn finally, from public opinion, political parties and professional groups to individuals, the official records on which the story told in this volume is very largely based leave one in little doubt that Neville Chamberlain was more responsible than any other person for Britain's grand strategy as it developed in the nineteen-thirties up to the outbreak of war. Mr. MacDonald's bolt was shot with the failure of the Disarmament Conference and he had little or nothing to add in his last year of office. Mr. Baldwin, for all his subtlety and touch in party and domestic affairs, was not in the present author's view as influential in the framing of defence policy as his latest biographers suggest. He was not without strong views, as his support for an Air Convention made clear. But he did not impress his personality on these events, despite his undoubted ability to coin the occasional perceptive phrase which might well, with another man, have been the inspiration of long-term policies.

Mr. Chamberlain, on the other hand, did provide consistency and drive in these matters throughout his years both as Chancellor of the Exchequer and as Prime Minister. From the time when the first Report of the Defence Requirements Committee was subjected to Ministerial scrutiny early in 1934, down to September 1939, it was Mr. Chamberlain's views which really mattered. It was he who, more than anyone else, produced a revised Report in the summer of 1934, stressing the need to limit defence spending in the interest of long-term economic strength, to strengthen spending on the Royal Air Force at the expense of the Army, and to concentrate the attention of the Royal Navy on Germany rather than Japan. In due course he handed on his campaign for economy and Treasury control to Sir John Simon and Sir Thomas Inskip, with the continuing themes of preference for air and sea-power as against land warfare, and for concentration on the danger from Germany rather than from Italy or Japan. Once he became Prime Minister he added the authority of his new office to convictions already made abundantly clear.

Lord Swinton, writing as a former personal friend as well as colleague of Mr. Chamberlain, said his impression was that the latter's 'personality started to undergo a significant change shortly after he became Prime Minister. Once he started involving himself in foreign affairs he became increasingly intolerant and suspicious

of colleagues'.⁽³⁵⁾ There is much evidence to support that view, but it is not complete as it stands. Official records and private letters to him suggest that Mr. Chamberlain was increasingly the strong man in the Cabinet even when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that his colleagues frequently turned to him as the man who could 'get things done'. Moreover, his own family letters make it clear that he was already then developing that overweening confidence in his own abilities and that poor opinion, sometimes even contempt, for those of others, which became so marked after May 1937. Undoubtedly his accession to the office of Prime Minister, while a cause for proper pride as it surely was to him, also gave him an opportunity not only to test his ideas further but also to do so with little or no constraint. In this he was helped by the existence of an 'inner Cabinet' of senior colleagues who took his lead and who followed him, for the most part, with little questioning. In the autumn and winter of 1937 his basic rearmament policies were restated and reaffirmed by Sir John Simon and Sir Thomas Inskip. Meanwhile the Prime Minister was steadily pursuing his own way in foreign affairs, by-passing the Foreign Secretary even more blatantly than Lloyd George had done with Lord Curzon. Mr. Eden, at length, could take no more. Lord Halifax, a personal friend, was more accommodating, although even he was compelled at times to object.

It has often been pointed out that Mr. Chamberlain's experience in local and central government was not a good preparation for diplomacy. It is also true that his own character was as ill-suited. The more certain he became of himself the less able he was to understand the motives and behaviour of others, even of those whom he was anxious to placate. And it is a measure of his powers of self-delusion that, from having been as Chancellor a man whom senior civil servants regarded as the ideal political head, he should now so frequently discard the experience of another great Department of State, accusing the staff of the Foreign Office of having 'no imagination and no courage', and taking a positive pleasure in claiming that he had 'sometimes even to re-write their despatches for them'.⁽³⁶⁾ It was not that Mr. Chamberlain was wrong in everything he tried to do—far from it. It made sense, and it was certainly urged upon him, to try to come to terms with Italy and, as Mr. Churchill was later to discover, there was no practical alternative to playing down our differences with Japan until there was genuine assurance of American help. It was Mr. Chamberlain's methods rather than his objectives which were mistaken. Above all, he was at fault in his apparent inability to learn from his own failures. With his Munich policy in ruins about him in the spring of 1939 it is extraordinary that he should still have been unable, despite the advice of close

friends, to broaden the basis of his Government. Labour leaders would not have served under him; some of his Conservative critics almost certainly would. And the more critical the international situation became the more one would have expected a wise man to look for help and advice from any quarter where it could be found.

To end there, however, would be grossly unfair to Mr. Chamberlain. Appeasement was not an unpopular policy. The prejudices and deep-rooted desires of most of the British coincided very closely with those of the Prime Minister. Like him, they were not at heart greatly concerned about the affairs of other nations, like him they accepted the rearmament programmes more in the letter than the spirit, like him, most of all, they simply did not want another war. It may be argued that statesmen should lead, not follow. But Mr. Chamberlain followed no-one. His policies were based on his own strong beliefs, above all his belief that war could bring no good to anyone, and that no sensible man would deliberately choose it as an instrument of policy. As he wrote at the end of April 1939, 'in cold blood I cannot see Hitler starting a world war for Danzig.'⁽³⁷⁾ To accuse such a man, even in the heat of Parliamentary debate, of belonging to a 'degenerate political age', and of 'conniving at [the] starving and bombing of non-combatants', made no sense. Mr. Chamberlain was obstinate and far too self-confident, but he was certainly no moral coward and he hated war. Mr. Churchill's final tribute to him was both magnanimous and fair:

'Whatever else history may or may not say about these terrible tremendous years, we can be sure that Neville Chamberlain acted with perfect sincerity according to his lights and strove to the utmost of his capacity and authority, which were powerful, to save the world from the awful, devastating struggle in which we are now engaged. This alone will stand him in good stead as far as the verdict of history is concerned.'⁽³⁸⁾

When war was declared Mr. Chamberlain confessed that all his beliefs and all his hopes lay in ruins, and much the same could be said for the British people. The general mood of September 1939 was one of disappointed resignation; there was no sense of crusade, as in August 1914. That did not come until Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain nearly a year later.

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Appendices

APPENDIX I

The Return to Eire of the Treaty Ports

By the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 it was agreed that, until an arrangement was made between the two countries whereby the Free State undertook her own coastal defence, 'the defence by sea of Great Britain and Ireland shall be undertaken by His Majesty's Imperial Forces'. For this purpose the Irish Government would provide for those forces, in time of peace, the harbour and other facilities indicated in an Annex to the Treaty, and also such other facilities as might be agreed upon between the two governments from time to time. In time of war the British forces would be provided with whatever they required. The list in the Annex included the dockyard of Berehaven, harbour defences at Queenstown and Lough Swilly together with local air defence facilities, and fuel storage depots at Haulbowline and Rathmullen. These provisions were to be reviewed after five years.⁽¹⁾

This arrangement offended Irish nationalist sentiment, and all the more so when it became clear during discussions in 1926-27 that the British Government at that time was firmly opposed to handing the ports back to Ireland.⁽²⁾ Then, during the Jubilee meeting of the Dominion Prime Ministers in May 1935 the Irish Prime Minister, Mr. de Valera, authorised his representative, Mr. Dulanty, to make a declaration concerning the ports, and followed this up with more direct overtures to the British Government later in the same year. The general basis of the Irish proposal for revision was that the ports should revert to Irish sovereign control while the Irish Government would pay for the defences of the ports, would undertake necessary preparations in consultation with the Government in London, and would promise never willingly to allow Ireland to be used as a base for operations against Britain.⁽³⁾

These overtures led to a detailed investigation of the whole Treaty Ports issue by the British Government during 1936. In the end no change was made. Nevertheless, the investigation is an important part of the background to the new agreement of April 1938. During the winter of 1935-36 the Dominions Office and the D.C.O.S. reviewed the position of the ports. This review made it clear that Mr. de Valera's assurances were, in one sense, beside the point. The vital consideration in the British argument for retaining the ports had always been their importance to the Royal Navy in the defence of western trade routes and communications; this was particularly true of Berehaven which was the harbour in south-western waters most suitable for use by the Main Fleet.⁽⁴⁾ Our preoccupation was with the use of these ports by British forces and not merely the denial of them to the enemy.⁽⁵⁾ But the enquiry also disclosed some limitations on this view and some grounds for compromise. In the first place the War Office, which had no direct interest in the ports from the user point of view, was now anxious to be rid of the responsibility for

defending them, while the Air Ministry wanted to encourage the Irish Government to organise its own air force and to draw up joint plans for co-operation with the R.A.F. Even the Admiralty, while claiming that in the long-term the ports were as necessary as ever, nonetheless admitted that their immediate importance was less because of the recent 're-orientation' of our defence policy. All of this, which suggested the possibility of some compromise, was strengthened by political arguments put forward in particular by the Dominions Office. If the ports were returned, of course subject to certain conditions about their future use, then improved relations with Ireland and also closer co-operation with the Irish military forces might well follow. While there was undoubtedly an element of risk in such an arrangement, it was worth taking because of the improved political situation which might result.⁽⁶⁾

This D.C.O.S. review was approved by the Chiefs of Staff and then by the C.I.D. in May 1936.⁽⁷⁾ By this time the Cabinet, and its Irish Situation Committee (I.S.C.), were considering the possibility of negotiations on the whole of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and decided to hold these in the autumn. At the same time the D.C.O.S. review was adopted as the basis for these negotiations so far as they concerned defence.⁽⁸⁾ But while these decisions were being made the I.S.C. raised a matter of what appeared to be critical importance. In their review the D.C.O.S. had argued on the assumption that the Free State would continue to be a member of the Commonwealth. But supposing this was not so? What would be the position if Ireland became simply a 'friendly foreign' country? The answer of the C.O.S. was that no alternative arrangement could give the same security as a friendly Ireland within the Commonwealth. If that was not possible, then the C.O.S. made it clear that they would prefer a comprehensive alliance to an arrangement whereby we leased or bought areas and then treated them as British possessions. The latter arrangement would present some administrative difficulties and would probably, in any case, be unacceptable to the Irish. The former would be more likely to meet with Irish approval and should provide us with a satisfactory method of ensuring that the defences and facilities at the ports were being properly maintained; it could, in addition, lead to a substantial degree of co-operation in peace-time.⁽⁹⁾

In the end these particular negotiations foundered. There proved to be no question of alliance because the Free State stopped short of moving completely outside the Commonwealth. More importantly, the British Government was concerned with a general settlement, not merely new defence arrangements; and there were difficulties over finance and trade which at that time proved insuperable. But there was one difficulty in the area of defence which, on its own, would almost certainly have proved conclusive in the circumstances of 1936. The Chiefs of Staff insisted that it was absolutely vital that the ports should not be returned to the Free State without a firm assurance that we would be free to use them in time of war. Mr. de Valera, while repeatedly expressing his private view that the ports would in fact be available, was adamant that he could not possibly make any prior commitment.⁽¹⁰⁾

Despite this breakdown in 1936 it was almost inevitable, given political

changes both actual and impending, that negotiations should be reopened relatively soon. The External Relations Act of December 1936, and the expected new constitution which became law in December 1937, by which Ireland now became the state of Eire, republican in everything but name, making no provision for continued membership of the Commonwealth, and asserting Eire's right to neutrality, all made the Treaty Ports arrangements of 1921 due for reconsideration.⁽¹¹⁾ Early in 1937, in fact, the Dominions Secretary—Mr. Malcolm MacDonald—cited the desirability of a new defence agreement as one reason for accepting the External Relations Act, and pressed for an early resumption of negotiations.⁽¹²⁾ He was supported in this view both by the Cabinet and by its Irish Situation Committee; but no serious moves were made until some months after the change of government in London.⁽¹³⁾

Then in the autumn of 1937 there were some detailed informal talks between Mr. de Valera and Mr. MacDonald. On the Treaty Ports the Irish Prime Minister repeated his earlier views but, in one respect, he added to them. He reaffirmed his undertaking that the ports would not be used by an enemy; he again declared his intention of spending whatever was necessary, within the limits of his country's resources, to keep the defences of the ports in a satisfactory condition; and he repeated what he had already said publicly before, that if in spite of all this Irish resources proved inadequate to keep an enemy at bay then Britain's help would be invited without hesitation. But, and although he still said his own private conviction was that we would be granted the use of the ports in an emergency, he also remained adamant that there could be no prior guarantee of this. Moreover, and here was the new note, he warned Mr. MacDonald that if Britain continued to hold the ports against Ireland's wishes then she might find herself, in a war, forced to defend them from land attacks by 'irresponsible but considerable Irish forces'. The choice, as Mr. de Valera saw it, was between continuing our present occupation, thus incurring further ill-will and prejudicing any chance of Ireland coming into a war on our side, or of returning the ports, gaining goodwill and co-operation, and thus securing at least benevolent neutrality from Ireland in a war and perhaps positive military aid. Mr. de Valera said he, himself, was anxious to co-operate and proposed a meeting between members of the two governments to discuss 'all the important matters involved'.⁽¹⁴⁾

It looks as though Mr. MacDonald, the Cabinet and the I.S.C. were all now persuaded that we ought to look for a new agreement on the basis of Mr. de Valera's most recent proposals, and that this point was reached before the Chiefs of Staff were asked for any further advice. Mr. Chamberlain is on record as anxious for a new defence agreement even if its terms fell short of what we had stipulated so far. The problem was whether our present rights would, in fact, stand us in good stead during a war or whether it would be better to give them up now and trust to Ireland's 'essential goodwill'. It is clear that he preferred the second course, as did the Dominions Secretary and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. Other Ministers did not disagree.⁽¹⁵⁾

Nonetheless, the Chiefs of Staff were consulted while there was still

sufficient time to take their views fully into consideration. In their new review they explained more fully than in their 1936 paper what the Admiralty wanted from the Treaty Ports. First there was the use of Queenstown and Lough Swilly by our anti-submarine forces; if those forces had to operate from bases further east then they would be restricted to shorter periods at sea. Next, Berehaven and Kingstown (the latter had not, in fact, been mentioned in the 1921 Treaty) would be useful as bases for our auxiliary forces for both minesweeping and anti-submarine purposes. None of these ports would be used, as they had been in 1917, for the assembly of convoys because the increased endurance of modern escort vessels would make it possible to use ports in Britain instead. But if enemy submarine activity were to extend further west across the Atlantic, or if Portsmouth could not be held, or if there were enemy surface attacks in the Western Approaches, then escorts would have to be based on Irish ports and Berehaven might prove valuable as a base for part of the Channel Force. Finally, if Scottish waters could not be used, then Lough Swilly's importance would rapidly grow. In other words, although the Admiralty did not now claim that the Treaty Ports were vital to the likely war-time operations of the Royal Navy, they still argued that the lack of these facilities might hamper naval operations and make our anti-submarine warfare measures far less effective. If, in addition, fighting in the Far East reduced the strength of the Navy in home waters, then our difficulties would be greatly increased without the use of the Irish ports. The Air Ministry's war-time plans also envisaged the use of Berehaven as a base for reconnaissance squadrons.

These undoubted disadvantages to the Royal Navy and, to a much lesser extent, to the Royal Air Force, were in the final analysis outweighed by the great gain to the Army which would follow from handing back the Treaty Ports to the Government of Eire. It was estimated that the Army would need one Infantry Brigade Group simply to hold each of the ports in face of a hostile Irish population. If, further than that, the ports were to be used safely by the Navy, then the hinterland of the ports would have to be occupied and that would demand a division plus anti-aircraft defences for each of them. Moreover, if the attitude of the Irish population became even more hostile it might become necessary to occupy the whole country. In the light of all these considerations the Chiefs of Staff were well aware of the importance, above all else, of friendly relations with Eire. They therefore concluded that it would be wise to waive our former insistence on some guarantee of the use of the ports in time of war if by so doing we could secure an otherwise satisfactory agreement and more friendly relations with the Irish Government and people.⁽¹⁶⁾ Although this paper was not discussed in detail by the Cabinet it was decided that while we might agree to give back the ports unconditionally we should, equally, make it clear that we did so only with great reluctance and as a substantial concession.⁽¹⁷⁾

Negotiations began on 17th January 1938. The Dominions Secretary had already warned his colleagues that Mr. de Valera was in a more difficult frame of mind than he had been the previous autumn, in particular about the political problem of partition, and that proved

to be so. Since the partition talks made no progress the Irish Prime Minister refused to budge an inch on defence. The most he would offer was to plan Eire's defences as part of a system common both to Eire and Britain, on the clear understanding that it would be for the Eire Government to decide on the time to bring such agreed plans into operation. But even though he was willing to make a public declaration to that effect he would not agree to put such terms on paper in a formal agreement, and recommended the British negotiators to count on having an alternative set of plans, based on the assumption of no co-operation with Eire, available for war. 'It would,' he said, 'be the height of unwisdom for the United Kingdom to make any more favourable assumption'. When at last Mr. Chamberlain said that he accepted Mr. de Valera's condition that there could be no prior guarantee that Britain would have the use of the Irish ports in war, then the latter agreed to go back to his Cabinet with a new draft defence paper for their consideration.⁽¹⁸⁾ This draft, in addition to the proposal for common plans mentioned above, also proposed that, until such time as the Irish forces were strong enough to provide for Eire's defence on their own, the Government of Eire would ask Britain to supply forces for the defence of the ports and that, as far as possible, Eire would buy equipment which could not be made locally from the United Kingdom.⁽¹⁹⁾

When talks were resumed between the two delegations on 23rd February 1938, Mr. de Valera now refused to consider any formal defence agreement—to some extent, no doubt, because of his failure to achieve any solution of the partition problem satisfactory to Eire. He did, however, promise that if the ports were returned to Eire unconditionally then he would make a unilateral declaration that they would never be used against us and would, if questioned in the Dail, explain what he had said to us informally about consultation and co-operation.⁽²⁰⁾ British Ministers were to some extent divided on what to do. Lord Hailsham, the Lord Chancellor, in particular, felt that there were serious doubts about our being able to use the ports when we most needed them and also that, even if they were available, we would not be able to ensure that their defences were in good order. Others, Sir John Simon and Sir Samuel Hoare among them, argued that the ports were not of much military importance anyway, and probably more of a liability than an asset. Most, following the lead of the Prime Minister and Mr. MacDonald, felt that even this concession was worthwhile if it improved relations with Eire, and that it could be justified to the electorate by arguing that the other Dominions, also, had no definite defence commitments to us. Finally, the Cabinet decided to return the ports unconditionally, Lord Hailsham recording his dissent.⁽²¹⁾

A statement dealing with defence, together with others on trade and financial matters, was then signed by the two Prime Ministers on 25th April 1938.⁽²²⁾ The defence statement formally abrogated the relevant articles of the 1921 Treaty and gave the date of transfer of the ports as not later than 31st December 1938. The Government of Eire made no formal commitments in return. But, later in April, Mr. de Valera did fulfil his promise by making two statements in the Dail. While

emphasising that the return of the ports was unconditional and that there was no secret bargain, he went on to say that it was in Eire's interest to make sure that her territory was not made the base of attack upon a neighbouring country, and that she must therefore be certain that her defences were strong enough to resist attack. He touched on the common interest between Eire and Britain in matters of defence, pointing out that the two countries were natural allies if Eire should be attacked by a third party.⁽²³⁾

In Britain the public, the press and Parliament were certainly not critical of the surrender of the ports, although whether from indifference or positive approval is difficult to say. The strongest criticisms, among the few who disapproved, came from Mr. Churchill, himself one of those responsible for the 1921 Treaty. He was convinced that the ports were still vital to us. Moreover, he forecast that, in a war, Ireland might either remain neutral or that she might sell her collaboration at the price of ending partition. While the lack of strong public reaction is perhaps not surprising, what is more puzzling is that the Admiralty did not oppose the change more strongly. It is true that naval reasons for retaining the ports were those advanced in most detail and most persistently. Nonetheless, it does look as though the Admiralty was less apprehensive of the consequences of the change than might have been expected. Writing many years later, Lord Chatfield, who was First Sea Lord in April 1938, argued that we were still better placed after the return of the Treaty Ports than we had been in 1917. The destroyers on which, with a small German navy, we should largely rely for our defence of the approaches to the British Isles, were bigger and had more endurance than their predecessors; our anti-submarine methods were much improved; and we had under construction a number of escort and patrol vessels—although admittedly not enough. Moreover, with France as our ally and a neutral Norway, the Admiralty believed that they could ensure the safety of the sea lanes.⁽²⁴⁾ Whether this was a sound judgment or not is something which is dealt with in later volumes in this series.

* The qualification about Norway does not appear in the records used in this narrative.

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APPENDIX II*

The Defence of India

During the eighty years between the suppression of the Mutiny and the outbreak of the Second World War the defence of India comprised two related but, to some extent, separate problems; that of the defence of the sub-continent against outside attack, principally along the north-western frontier, and that of the contribution of India to the general defence of the Empire. The first of these attracted, for the most part, far more attention from those in Whitehall who planned the defence of Britain and the Empire both before the period dealt with in detail in this volume and during the early part of it. It is also true, however, that in the nineteen-thirties there was a considerable change in emphasis. By the time the war broke out, India's contribution to the overall problem of Imperial defence, and the fitting of that contribution into a common strategy, were matters of far greater concern to the C.I.D. and to the Chiefs of Staff than the actual defence of Indian soil.

Even before the end of the nineteenth century India contributed towards the upkeep of British diplomatic establishments in Persia and China, bore the whole of the military costs of the Aden settlement, and sent her troops to overseas wars in Egypt, Abyssinia, Sudan and elsewhere, bearing most of the expense herself. Indeed, so substantial were these commitments becoming that the Government of India persuaded the British Government in 1895 to set up a Royal Commission—known by the name of its chairman, Lord Welby—to enquire into India's financial burdens incurred in this way. This was the first time there had been a detailed investigation into the extent of India's direct interest in general Imperial defence. It was also the last time the subject was systematically dealt with until the late nineteen-thirties. The Welby Commission Report was still appealed to forty years after it was written, without any overall effort to keep up to date the Commission's attempt to define those areas where the Government of India had 'a distinct and special interest' and how financial responsibilities should be allocated as between India and Britain. In the nineteen-twenties these financial problems were still being dealt with by inter-Departmental bargaining—not always of an edifying kind—just as they had been in the later years of Victoria's reign. And the process was not made easier by slowly growing Indian independence.

This last factor would almost certainly have prevented the development of plans for the unification of Imperial defence, including India as a major unit, even had pressures for such a development been stronger than they were. Such pressures did exist, and not altogether surprisingly when India's major contribution to the First World War is remembered, and

* I am indebted to Mr. John Rawson, St. John's College, Oxford, for help from his unpublished doctoral thesis in this Appendix.

also the fact that the Middle East, by now an area of established relevance to Indian defence, was also one of the disturbed areas in the post-war years. But the views of the Indian Legislative Assembly, whatever its constitutional powers, were clearly against the assumption that the army in India should be considered as part of the total armed forces of the Empire. And the Indian Military Requirements Sub-Committee of the C.I.D., reporting in June 1922, seemed more concerned to allay Indian fears by promises of consultation, and to raise Indian hopes by the formation of a Territorial Force, than to provide a new analysis of the military responsibilities of India within the Empire as a whole except in certain limited circumstances.⁽¹⁾

A few years later, in 1927, the C.I.D. Defence of India Sub-Committee*—although admittedly set up mainly to consider the external threat to India via Afghanistan—still avoided an explicit analysis of the interrelationship between specifically Indian and general Imperial defence. But, by emphasising in the Defence of India Plan the commitment of all Imperial resources to India's defence in face of a major threat, it at least implied the corollary that Indian troops had some responsibility to take their part when other vital Imperial interests were threatened. This, however, was no more than an implication, and that for several years to come.

Let us now turn back to the better known aspect of the defence of India, i.e. that of the direct protection of India herself.

Until the early twentieth century the principal problem of the defence of India was seen as the defence of her north-western frontier against possible attack by Russia; and the defence of the north-western frontier was seen as the defence of Afghanistan against Russian penetration. This was made clear in a number of early C.I.D. minutes and memoranda. In 1907, for example, a sub-committee of the C.I.D. under the chairmanship of Lord Morley, commented that—

'We accept the view that the gates of India are in Afghanistan; that the problem of Afghanistan dominates the situation in India; and that the lines we are pledged to defend determine our true strategic frontier in case of war. . . .

We consider that alike by definite treaty and by our own plain interests, our obligations to guard the independence and integrity of Afghanistan are unimpaired; and that the deliberate crossing of the Oxus or the occupation of Herat by Russia would be the violation of a frontier which we are bound to defend.

We therefore assume that Russian action of the kind indicated would be followed by a declaration of war against that Power.'⁽²⁾

The recommendations of the sub-committee were shortly afterwards accepted by the C.I.D. 'as a general guide to the policy to be adopted in the event of Russian aggression directed against India'.⁽³⁾

* See below, p. 826.

The Anglo-Russian entente of 1907 relieved the pressure to some extent. But by the end of the First World War Russia was no longer an ally—indeed, not even a friend. The first major post-war statement on the defence of India was a report of the C.I.D. Sub-Committee on Indian Military Requirements of June 1922.⁽⁴⁾ For our purposes at this point, that report included two significant items. First, that while all of Britain's resources would be available, if necessary, to maintain British supremacy in India, it was, nevertheless, 'the recognised duty of India to provide for her own defence against external and internal dangers in all but the gravest emergencies'. Second, that in the present financial and military circumstances it would not be possible to base the defence of the north-western frontier on any plan of campaign involving an advance in force to or towards Kabul. Our policy, therefore, should be to avoid committing the Field Army to military operations on a large scale in mountainous border regions, but to hold it ready to strike a counter-blow against the enemy's concentration of force or to deal with internal risings in India.

In July 1926, Lord Birkenhead, then Secretary of State for India, informed the C.I.D. that there had recently been a dispute between Afghanistan and Russia over the possession of an island in the Oxus and that, although that particular dispute had been referred to a Joint Commission for settlement, war between the two countries could nevertheless well arise out of this issue. During the following autumn and winter there were several more papers on the subject from the Chiefs of Staff and from the Secretary of State.⁽⁵⁾ Then in March, 1927, the Prime Minister instructed that a Defence of India Sub-Committee be set up to report generally on the situation and with particular reference to—

- '(a) whether the integrity of Afghanistan was as important to Britain in the mid-nineteen-twenties as it had been reckoned to be in the years just before the war; and
- (b) if it was, was it also still to be assumed, as it was in 1907, that "the deliberate crossing of the Oxus or the occupation of Herat by Russia would be followed by a declaration of war against that Power?" and
- (c) if the answer to the question posed in (b) was in the negative, then at what point would a *casus belli* arise?'⁽⁶⁾

The chairman of the sub-committee was Lord Birkenhead and other members consisted of eight Ministers, the three Chiefs of Staff, and Field Marshal Sir Claud Jacob, Secretary of the Military Department at the India Office.

The report of the sub-committee substantially reaffirmed the strategic views of the pre-1914 period. It concluded that 'the material consequences of Russian encroachment on Afghanistan would be no less dangerous to India, and no less disastrous to our general interests at the present time than they were in the past';⁽⁷⁾ from which it followed that such an attack would continue to be regarded, as in the decisions taken in 1907, as a *casus belli* to be followed by a declaration of war by Britain against Russia. It

was also decided that there was a reasonable prospect that the northern frontier of Afghanistan would be recovered even after the initial losses of the early stage of a Russian attack, although this decision was reached only with some difficulty. The Chiefs of Staff in Whitehall differed from their colleagues who advised the Government of India, and were distinctly more optimistic about the outcome of military operations against Russia. Both Staffs regarded the immediate occupation of Kandahar on the outbreak of hostilities as essential. The Indian Staff then advocated the taking up of a defensive position on the Helmand, while the British advocated an offensive forward from the Helmand, mainly by mechanised and air forces. The Indian plan, the report pointed out, was designed for the defence of India on the Hindu Kush—Helmand line covering only the southernmost provinces of Afghanistan; the British plan was designed to drive the enemy out of Afghanistan altogether. The sub-committee was in favour of offence.⁽⁸⁾ Finally, although the sub-committee had some recommendations about the preparedness of the army and air force in India, it was nonetheless assumed that a war of the kind under consideration would be a major imperial responsibility, that large British forces would be involved including army reinforcements of up to 250,000 men during the first three months of war and the completion of the R.A.F. 52-squadron expansion scheme, and that the whole campaign should be under the control of the Imperial Government.* These recommendations were then approved by the C.I.D. in January 1928.⁽¹⁰⁾

But even while a traditional attitude towards the defence of India was being reaffirmed, and a traditional strategy for securing that defence, there were the signs of a change. That change was to see India increasingly as a contributor to and a centre for the distribution of resources for overall Imperial defence rather than an object for the defence of which these resources would be concentrated. There were two main reasons for the change. First, during the nineteen-thirties there was less anxiety about the traditional sources of danger to the security of India. A direct threat from Russia, using an attack on Afghanistan as a means of invading India from the north-west, was considered less likely than hitherto. A Foreign Office appreciation of September 1930 argued that though it was possible only to conjecture what Soviet policy aimed at, nevertheless it was beginning to look as though the Soviet Government was concerned to extend Russian 'influence in Asiatic countries with the ultimate object of securing their spontaneous adhesion to the Soviet Union, rather than at extending the frontiers of the Union by force of arms.'⁽¹¹⁾ Further, Russian influence in Afghanistan was thought to have grown weaker since the overthrow of the radical intriguer, Amir Amanullah, in 1928, and his replacement by the more conservative and pro-British Nadir Shah. By 1934 it was argued that the general position in Afghanistan was distinctly more favourable to us than it had been six or seven years before.⁽¹²⁾ Indeed, a year earlier this point had been made in the

* Some of these points, in fact, occur in the second report of the sub-committee of April 1929.⁽⁹⁾

Chiefs of Staff annual review of Imperial defence for 1933. In a lengthy section on India in that review only the last paragraph was devoted to the risk of a Soviet attack on Afghanistan, and the situation in April of that year was summed up in the words—'it was the considered opinion of His Majesty's Government that there is no immediate danger of the Soviet attacking Afghanistan or applying forcible pressure.'⁽¹³⁾ Rather more indicative of a change of attitude was H.M. Government's answer to a question put by the Afghan Government, what would be the policy of H.M. Government in the event of Soviet aggression against Afghanistan? In the answer there was no mention of any *casus belli* or of vital British interests. Instead, the Cabinet instructed H.M. Minister at Kabul to reply that, if relations between the Afghan Government and the Soviet Union became so strained that the integrity of Afghanistan appeared to be threatened, then a request for diplomatic assistance 'would be carefully and sympathetically considered' in London. The reply then continued:

'... in the event of serious and unprovoked invasion of Afghan territory by Russia His Majesty's Government would be prepared, if diplomatic intervention failed, to break off diplomatic and official commercial relations with the Soviet Government. It was, however, made clear to the Afghan Government that His Majesty's Government were not prepared to go further than this towards defining their attitude in advance, and that the question whether any further action could be taken, if and when the case arose, would depend entirely upon the circumstances at the time.'⁽¹⁴⁾

It would, of course, be fair to comment that this was simply the proper cautious diplomatic language of any government dealing with hypothetical situations. At the same time it would be equally fair, on the basis of the available evidence, to argue that there was less anxiety about a Soviet threat to India via Afghanistan and also more reluctance to regard such a threat as a *casus belli*. The emphasis was changing from that of the period of Balfour and of Birkenhead.

This brings us to the second reason for what is here argued to be a radical change in emphasis on the place of India in the overall strategy for Imperial defence after the first World War, and particularly in the nineteen-thirties. But first a word about the principal forces in India which were involved in the effects of this change. The Army in India consisted of a Field Force, Covering Troops and Internal Security Troops. In the mid-nineteen-thirties the Field Force was composed of four divisions and four cavalry brigades and was regarded as a striking force available for operations against Russia, and perhaps Afghanistan, in a campaign on India's north-western frontier. Moreover, troops for overseas service—and the Government of India had accepted a number of commitments of that kind—were drawn from the Field Force. Covering Troops, of about three divisions, were responsible for the defence of India's land frontiers. Finally, there were a further forty-three infantry

battalions and seven cavalry regiments, comprising the Internal Security Troops, to assist the civil authorities to maintain law and order.

One further fact of importance. Since the Mutiny the practice of 'holding' had been observed in Indian Army units. By this practice there was a proportion of British troops in such units, the proportion varying according to operational function. In field units, for example, there was normally one British soldier to three Indians; in l.-of-c. units one to eight. It was virtually inevitable, therefore, that changes in Britain's strategic plans affecting the British Army, and also changes in pay and general conditions of service, would have an impact on the army in India and upon the policies of the Government of India.

To return to our main theme. The post-war peace treaties had expanded Britain's direct interests and responsibilities in the Middle East; the Washington Treaties, soon afterwards, left Britain without a committed ally in the Far East. Both these facts focussed increasing attention upon the place of India in all matters of Imperial strategy east of Suez. As early as November 1918 the War Office had under consideration the setting up of an Imperial reserve force in India, and in a letter to the India Office, doubted 'whether it is advisable to make any appreciable reduction [in Indian forces] at present . . . in view of the possibility that the strategic position in the Pacific might require the employment of Indian troops, and in view of the uncertainty of conditions in Persia.'⁽¹⁵⁾

On more than one occasion during the nineteen-twenties the need for an Imperial reserve in India, for employment on operations in the Indian Ocean area and the Far East, was stressed both officially and in public. Lord Haldane did so, both as Chairman of the C.I.D. during the Labour Government of 1924* and as Leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords in 1927. In March 1927, for example, he told the House of Lords of his view—

' . . . that in these days of rapid transport it would be possible to keep at least some part of our own Home Army, some part of our Expeditionary Force, generally in India.'⁽¹⁶⁾

At about the same time Rear-Admiral Richmond, then Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy on the East Indies Station, and later Commandant of the Imperial Defence College, took up the same theme with specific reference to the defence of Singapore as itself the basis of the defence of British and Imperial interests (including those of India) in the Far East.⁽¹⁷⁾

But these suggestions and pleas were of no avail. The late twenties were not a time for defence expansion and experiment in Britain. And India herself, native India, was increasingly concerned with other things, things which of their nature made it increasingly unlikely that, in an emergency, troops from the Indian Army would willingly be offered for

* During this Government the Prime Minister Mr. MacDonald was President, and Lord Haldane Chairman, of the C.I.D. Mr. MacDonald did not take much part in the Committee's work.

general Imperial defence. And this outlook was reflected in the almost complete absence of detailed treatment of India in the two major Reports of the Defence Requirements Committee in 1933 and 1935.⁽¹⁸⁾ However, in the second of those Reports there was a remark to the effect that it was 'only fair to expect India also to loosen the purse strings' now that the British Government was planning to spend so much more money on defence.⁽¹⁹⁾ That comment proved a guide to a good deal of debate about the connection between Indian and overall Imperial defence during the last years before war broke out.

As early as January 1934, Lord Hailsham, then Secretary of State for War, wrote to the India Office about India's Imperial defence obligations, suggesting that 'it would be sound to put matters on a more definite footing,' the implication of that suggestion being his wish that, in an emergency, at least some units of the Indian Army would be reserved for service outside India as a matter of priority. Lord Hailsham failed to get any explicit agreement to his request. But correspondence between him, the India Office and the Government of India did go some way towards eliciting at least an understanding that up to one division would be available for operations overseas. And that one division concept was formulated more specifically in the near future.⁽²⁰⁾

The turning point in these matters came in 1937 at a time when the Japanese menace came to the surface once more with the resumption of Sino-Japanese hostilities. In Britain the new Secretary of State for War in Mr. Chamberlain's administration was Mr. Hore-Belisha, and the latter's plans to modernise the British Army—including recruitment—immediately posed serious financial problems for the Government of India. Would the latter be forced to agree to a reduction in the number of British troops in India if it was unwilling to find more money to pay and equip them? Or was there some other way to avoid reducing the Indian Army while yet avoiding extra cost? So far, the Government of India had opposed the concept of an Imperial reserve partly on the ground that such a concept implied that there were more troops in India than were, strictly speaking, necessary for India's own security. Could that implication somehow be circumvented or at least be made more palatable to Indian opinion? Perhaps the basis of a new arrangement might be that Britain would provide the money and India find the men.⁽²¹⁾ Detailed proposals to that effect were made by the Indian General Staff in the spring of 1938.⁽²²⁾

In other words, the problems faced by the Government of India were created not only by long-term changes in India itself, but also by more recent developments in the international situation and, finally, by current changes in the British Army. Those last changes, begun to some extent by Mr. Duff Cooper, were now being pushed ahead more rapidly by his successor at the War Office, Mr. Hore-Belisha. Amongst those things which he strongly disapproved of in the Army as he found it, Mr. Hore-Belisha laid strong emphasis on the 'Indian obsession' which, he considered, prevented a detached and overall assessment of the proper strategic distribution of the British army's manpower throughout the world. He was not concerned, however, only with taking British troops

away from India but with making them, while still in India, also available for general Imperial purposes. He made this clear on a number of occasions, not least in his relatively brief but major statement on 'The Organisation of the Army For Its Role in War' presented to his ministerial colleagues in February 1938.⁽²³⁾

'By far the largest part of the Regular Army stationed overseas in peace,' he wrote, 'is absorbed by the garrisons of India and Burma. Since the reorganisation which followed the mutiny, the establishment of British troops has been reduced by only 20,000 men to 57,000. The establishment of the native Indian Army has risen by 7,000 to 139,000, backed by reserves of 37,000 men. In the period there have been great changes in India, the effects of which seem to suggest the desirability of re-examining the present requirements. Among such changes are the increased mobility of armies, the advent of the Air Arm, and the diminution of danger to Indian frontiers from external aggression.

The Government of India have accepted, subject to the situation within and beyond the land frontiers of India permitting, certain commitments to despatch forces overseas to discharge Imperial tasks not directly connected with the defence of India.

These include the following:

- (a) Reinforcement for Egypt (including Aden)—1 Infantry Brigade Group.
- (b) Reinforcement for Singapore—1 Infantry Brigade Group.
- (c) Garrison for Anglo-Iranian Oilfields—1 Infantry Brigade Group.

In addition, the Government of India have potential commitments in relation to the reinforcement of Hong Kong and Burma, and normally one Indian battalion is stationed at Hong Kong and one at Malaya.

Because of the special difficulties of the Mediterranean passage it is desirable to locate part of the Imperial strategic reserve, as well as its sources of supply, east of the Mediterranean basin. The present limitations on the availability of British forces in India to meet an emergency elsewhere to the best advantage are an inconvenient and perhaps dangerous restraint. Besides the questions of the actual proportion of British troops in India, and their availability as reserves, there are other questions which call for solution. Among these are the reorganisation of the Army in India on modern lines, the speed at which it can be effected, and the reduction of establishments as part of that reorganisation. Until decisions have been reached there can be no satisfactory redistribution of the British Army as a whole in

accordance with present strategic needs, nor can there be, in accordance with the same needs, a suitable reorganisation of the rest of the Army.'

The discussion within the Cabinet and the C.I.D. on this paper and its related issues led the C.I.D., at its meeting of 17th March 1938, to approve in principle 'the desirability of maintaining a reserve of British troops under the control of the War Office, as well as its sources of supply, in some locality east of the Mediterranean basin'. It was also noted that an inter-departmental committee was to be set up, including representatives of the Air Ministry and the Indian General Staff, to consider matters at issue between the War Office and India Office. That committee was then shortly set up under the chairmanship of Major-General H. R. Pownall, the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at the War Office, 'to report on the defence problems of India, and to make recommendations for the future composition and organisation of both the Army and the Royal Air Force in India'.⁽²⁴⁾ Its report began by describing the present composition and organisation of the army and air force in India, pointing out that their primary rôles were the defence of the north-western frontier and the approach areas to the north-west and the maintenance of internal security. The general strength of these forces was, it was emphasised, 'still largely based on the strategical situation as it existed fifteen years ago after the post-war reorganisation', when there had been a real danger of Russian and/or Afghan aggression against India while, elsewhere, the 'British Empire had apparently nothing else to fear'. In 1938 things were different. The threat to the north-western frontier had diminished although, admittedly, it could become serious again. On the other hand, other potential dangers to Britain and the Empire had greatly increased in Europe, in the Middle East and in the Far East, leading to a situation in which increasing calls on Britain's military forces were becoming more and more difficult to meet. Many battalions overseas, in Palestine for example, were numerically too weak for the proper performance of their duties. Moreover, the rise of potentially hostile naval and air powers in Europe and the Pacific had lessened the measure of security to India which the British fleet could provide. 'Hence, the defence of the vital areas in the communications in the Middle East and at Singapore is of more direct concern to India than has been the case hitherto, and the defence of Indian ports against sea-borne attack has assumed increased importance'. In other words, it was essential to regard the defence of India as being an integral part of the defence of the Empire as a whole rather than as a specific item demanding special treatment.

Two conclusions followed, it was suggested, from these general strategic propositions. First, that India was less under-defended than some other parts of the Empire and could make some contribution from her present resources to help elsewhere.⁽²⁵⁾ Second, that India was—with the one exception of Egypt—'the most suitable area East of the Mediterranean in which to station reserves for the Middle and Far East, and is in general less vulnerable than other possible areas'. The second conclusion was to

be seen, however, in conjunction with the need to station one infantry brigade in Palestine specifically for the reinforcement of Egypt.^{(26)*} The most important practical recommendations based on these conclusions were that four British infantry battalions should be 'surrendered' from the peace-time garrison of India to be stationed in future in Palestine and Malta, while one further Indian division should be allocated to H.M. Government as a strategic reserve for use wherever and whenever required.' The report then ended as follows:

'Finally, India cannot make the necessary provision for her security in all contingencies—for instance, in the event of aggression by a major Power—without Imperial assistance. On the other hand, India's contribution is vitally important to Imperial defence as a whole.

It is evident, therefore, that the defence of India cannot be considered as a self-contained problem.

We consider it very desirable, therefore, that the machinery of the Committee of Imperial Defence should be more fully utilised for the purpose of co-ordinating the defence of India with the defence of the Empire as a whole.'⁽²⁸⁾

This report, together with other relevant papers, was then discussed by the Chiefs of Staff,⁽²⁹⁾ by a Cabinet Committee⁽³⁰⁾ and then by the Cabinet itself.⁽³¹⁾ The upshot was that the recommendations and arguments of the Pownall Sub-Committee were accepted and one further major decision added. If the army in India was to provide an Imperial reserve and to be co-ordinated with the defence forces of the Empire as a whole, then it was essential that British troops in India 'should be organised, equipped and maintained on the same scale and under similar conditions of service as British troops elsewhere'.⁽³²⁾ This would cost money and demand careful planning. It was therefore considered necessary to send to India a Committee of Enquiry to review existing conditions, to make suggestions for the future, and to see what savings could be made in order to pay for modernisation.⁽³³⁾ The Committee, under the chairmanship of Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Chatfield, set sail for India in late October 1938, stayed about three months in India, and reported to the Cabinet in June 1939.⁽³⁴⁾ The Cabinet accepted the Committee's recommendations with very few amendments and the Committee report was then published just at the time of the outbreak of war.

The Chatfield Committee took the same broad strategic view as that taken by the Pownall Sub-Committee and, subsequently, by the Chiefs of Staff and the Cabinet. The old dangers, if still latent, were no longer so important as before, while new threats from Germany, Italy and Japan had arisen which posed a new menace to India's external security. Plans for India's defence must therefore provide not only against the possible recurrence of threats to the north-west frontier, 'but also to an increasing

* For a fuller treatment of this reinforcement and reserves problem see the Chiefs of Staff major Mediterranean and Middle East Appreciation.⁽²⁷⁾

extent for the protection of her sea communications in Eastern waters and the strategic points which are vital to their security'.⁽³⁵⁾

For this purpose the Chatfield Committee recommended that the old threefold division of troops in India be abolished. In the consequent reorganisation two items stood out as of major importance. First, a General Reserve would include a highly mobile striking force, with light tanks, motorised units and artillery capable of rapid and effective action on the north-west frontier. Second, since, in addition, that frontier threat had decreased in importance this fact, together with the modernisation suggested, would free troops for external defence and make possible cuts in army manpower in India. This latter point was one Mr. Hore-Belisha had been aiming at all along. The Committee recommended that the external defence force should be of approximately division strength and composed of both British and Indian units, that it should bear the title of External Troops and thus get rid of any name which would suggest a distinction between Imperial and Indian needs and responsibilities.

Detailed plans were also proposed for the air forces in India.⁽³⁶⁾ So far as the Royal Indian Navy was concerned reorganisation and modernisation were based on a plan drawn up in early 1938 whereby India was to provide a sea-going squadron of escort vessels to operate in conjunction with the Royal Navy.⁽³⁷⁾

The basic assumption of the Chatfield Report, and one which was accepted by the Committee more openly and fully than by the earlier Pownall Committee, was made explicit. The Chatfield Report explained that—

'The general principle that we would put forward . . . is that the forces maintained in India should be adequate not merely for the narrower purposes of purely local defence, but also to assist in ensuring her security against the external threats that we have described; and further, that India should acknowledge that her responsibility cannot in her own interests be safely limited to the defence of her land frontiers and coasts.'

And the insistence that these new plans should be supported by India because they were in her own interest was further emphasised by the proposal that the Government of India should bear the ordinary maintenance costs and, perhaps, the extraordinary costs of external defence troops when used overseas. On the other hand, initial modernisation costs were to be borne largely by the British Government.

The Chatfield proposals were accepted, largely as they stood, by the Cabinet in June, 1939,⁽³⁸⁾ but were not published until early September. Whether they would have encountered much opposition in India but for the outbreak of war it is difficult to say. In any case, the whole process of modernisation envisaged for the forces in India was seen, in the summer of 1939, as a long-term plan and not one carrying the highest priority where limited supplies of arms and equipment were involved.

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| (5) e.g. C.I.D. 149-D | 826 |
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| (23) C.P. 26(38) | 831 |
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| (37) Ibid., Chapter 8 and para. 290 | | 834 |
| (38) Cab. Cons. (meeting of 7th June 1939) | | 834 |

APPENDIX III

List of Administrations from 1919-39

Coalition Government, 1916-22

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Prime Minister | D. Lloyd George. |
| Lord President: | Lord Curzon. |
| | A. J. Balfour from 23rd October 1919. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Finlay. |
| | Lord Birkenhead from 10th January 1919. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | Lord Crawford. |
| | A. Bonar Law from 10th January 1919. |
| | A. Chamberlain from 23rd March 1921. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | A. Bonar Law. |
| | A. Chamberlain from 10th January 1919. |
| | Sir D. Horne from 1st April 1921. |
| Foreign Secretary: | A. Balfour. |
| | Lord Curzon from 23rd October 1919. |
| Home Secretary: | Sir G. Cave (Viscount). |
| | E. Shortt from 10th January 1919. |
| Admiralty: | Sir E. Carson. |
| | Sir E. Geddes from 17th July 1917. |
| | W. Long from 10th January 1919. |
| | Lord Lee from 13th February 1921. |
| Colonies: | W. Long. |
| | Lord Milner from 10th January 1919. |
| | W. Churchill from 13th February 1921. |
| War Office: | Lord Derby. |
| | Lord Milner from 18th April 1918. |
| | (10th January 1919, War Office and Air Ministry combined). |
| | W. Churchill from 10th January 1919. |
| | (13th February 1921, War Office only). |
| | Sir L. Worthington-Evans from 13th February 1921 |
| Air: | W. Churchill from 10th January 1919. |
| | F. Guest from 1st April 1921. |
| India: | A. Chamberlain from 10th December 1916. |
| | E. Montagu from 17th July 1917. |
| | Lord Peel from 19th March 1922. |
| Scotland: | R. Munro from 10th December 1916. |
| Board of Trade: | Sir A. Stanley from December 1916. |
| | Sir A. Geddes from 26th May 1919. |
| | Sir R. Horne from 19th March 1920. |
| | S. Baldwin from 1st April 1921. |

Coalition Government, 1916-22—continued

| | |
|--|---|
| Board of Agriculture and Fisheries: (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries) | R. Prothero from 10th December 1916 (Lord Ernle). Lord Lee from 15th August 1919. Sir A. Griffith-Boscawen from 13th February 1921. |
| Board of Health: | C. Addison from 24th June 1919. Sir A. Mond from 1st April 1921. |
| Board of Education: | H. Fisher from 10th December 1916. |
| Labour: | J. Hodge from 10th December 1916. G. Roberts from 17th August 1917. Sir R. Horne from 10th January 1919. T. Macnamara from 19th March 1920. |
| Duchy of Lancaster: | Sir F. Cawley from 10th December 1916. Lord Beaverbrook from 10th February 1918 (and Minister of Propaganda/Information). Lord Downham from 4th November 1918. (Lord Crawford from 10th January 1919 and office not in the Cabinet). |
| Munitions (Supply): | C. Addison from 10th December 1916. W. Churchill from 17th July 1917. (10th January 1919 became Ministry of Supply). Lord Inverforth from 10th January 1919. (Office abolished 21st March 1921). |

Bonar Law's Cabinet: October 1922-May 1923

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Prime Minister: | A. Bonar Law. |
| Lord President: | Lord Salisbury. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Cave. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Stanley Baldwin. |
| Home Office: | W. C. Bridgeman. |
| Foreign Office: | Lord Curzon. |
| Colonies: | Duke of Devonshire. |
| War: | Lord Derby. |
| India: | Lord Peel. |
| Scotland: | Lord Novar. |
| Admiralty: | L. S. Amery. |
| Board of Trade: | Sir P. Lloyd-Greame. |
| Education: | E. F. L. Wood. |
| Health: | Sir A. Griffith-Boscawen. |
| Agriculture: | Sir Robert Saunders. |
| Labour: | Sir A. Montague-Barlow. |

Neville Chamberlain succeeded Griffith-Boscawen in February 1923.

Baldwin's First Cabinet: May 1923-January 1924

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Prime Minister: | Stanley Baldwin. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | Lord Robert Cecil. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Neville Chamberlain (from 28th August). |
| Air: | Sir Samuel Hoare. |
| Health: | Neville Chamberlain (until 27th August) Sir William Joynson-Hicks. |
| Postmaster-General: | Sir L. Worthington-Evans. |

Other positions were filled by the ministers who had held them under Bonar Law.

MacDonald's First Labour Cabinet: January-November 1924

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary: | J. Ramsay MacDonald. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Haldane. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | J. R. Clynes. |
| Lord President: | Lord Parmoor. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Philip Snowden. |
| Home Office: | Arthur Henderson. |
| Colonies: | J. H. Thomas. |
| War: | Stephen Walsh. |
| India: | Lord Olivier. |
| Air: | Lord Thomson. |
| Scotland: | William Adamson. |
| Board of Trade: | Sidney Webb. |
| Education: | C. P. Trevelyan. |
| Admiralty: | Lord Chelmsford. |
| Health: | John Wheatley. |
| Agriculture: | Noel Buxton. |
| Labour: | Thomas Shaw. |
| Postmaster-General: | Vernon Hartshorn. |
| First Commissioner of Works: | F. W. Jowett. |
| Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster: | Josiah Wedgwood. |

Baldwin's Second Cabinet: November 1924-June 1929

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Prime Minister: | Stanley Baldwin. |
| Lord President: | Lord Curzon. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | Lord Salisbury. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Cave. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | W. S. Churchill. |

Baldwin's Second Cabinet: November 1924-June 1929—continued

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Home Office: | Sir William Joynson-Hicks. |
| Foreign Office: | Austen Chamberlain. |
| Colonies: | Leopold Amery. |
| War: | Sir L. Worthington-Evans. |
| India: | Lord Birkenhead. |
| Air: | Sir Samuel Hoare. |
| Scotland: | Sir John Gilmour. |
| Board of Trade: | Sir P. Cuncliffe-Lister (Lloyd-Greame). |
| Education: | Lord Eustace Percy. |
| Admiralty: | W. C. Bridgeman. |
| Health: | Neville Chamberlain. |
| Agriculture: | E. F. L. Wood. |
| Labour: | Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland. |
| Attorney-General: | Sir Douglas Hogg. |
| First Commissioner of Works: | Lord Peel. |
| Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster: | Lord Cecil. |

Lord Balfour succeeded Lord Curzon in April 1925; Walter Guinness succeeded Wood in November 1925. Lord Cushendun succeeded Lord Cecil in October 1927. Lord Hailsham (Sir Douglas Hogg) succeeded Lord Cave in March 1928, and was succeeded as Attorney-General by Sir Thomas Inskip. Lord Peel succeeded Lord Birkenhead in October 1928, and was succeeded at the Office of Works by Lord Londonderry.

MacDonald's Second Labour Cabinet: June 1929-August 1931

| | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Prime Minister: | J. Ramsay MacDonald. |
| Lord President: | Lord Parmoor. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Sankey. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | J. J. Thomas. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Philip Snowden. |
| Home Office: | J. R. Clynes. |
| Foreign Office: | Arthur Henderson. |
| Dominions and Colonies: | Lord Passfield. |
| War: | Thomas Shaw. |
| India: | W. Wedgwood Benn. |
| Air: | Lord Thomson. |
| Scotland: | William Adamson. |
| Board of Trade: | William Graham. |
| Education: | Sir Charles Trevelyan. |
| Admiralty: | A. V. Alexander. |
| Health: | Arthur Greenwood. |
| Agriculture: | Noel Buxton. |
| Labour: | Margaret Bondfield. |
| Works: | George Lansbury. |

MacDonald's Second Labour Cabinet: June 1929–August 1931—continued

Vernon Hartshorn succeeded Thomas as Lord Privy Seal in June 1930; Thomas went to the Colonial Office (separated from Dominions); Christopher Addison succeeded Noel Buxton at Agriculture. In October 1930, Lord Amulree succeeded Lord Thomson at the Air Ministry. In March 1931, Thomas Johnston succeeded Vernon Hartshorn, and H. B. Lees-Smith succeeded Trevelyan; Herbert Morrison, Minister of Transport, joined the Cabinet.

MacDonald's First National Government, August–November 1931

| | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Prime Minister: | J. Ramsay MacDonald. |
| Lord President: | Stanley Baldwin. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Sankey. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Philip Snowden. |
| Home Office: | Sir Herbert Samuel |
| Foreign Office: | Lord Reading. |
| Dominions: | J. H. Thomas. |
| India: | Sir Samuel Hoare. |
| Board of Trade: | Sir P. Cuncliffe-Lister. |
| Health: | Neville Chamberlain. |

MacDonald's Second National Government, November 1931–June 1935

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Prime Minister: | J. Ramsay MacDonald. |
| Lord President: | Stanley Baldwin. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Sankey. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | Lord Snowden. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Neville Chamberlain. |
| Home Office: | Sir Herbert Samuel. |
| Foreign Office: | Sir John Simon. |
| Colonies: | Sir P. Cuncliffe-Lister. |
| Dominions: | J. H. Thomas. |
| War: | Lord Hailsham. |
| India: | Sir Samuel Hoare. |
| Air: | Lord Londonderry. |
| Scotland: | Sir Archibald Sinclair |
| Board of Trade: | Walter Runciman. |
| Education: | Sir Donald Maclean. |
| Admiralty: | Sir Bolton Eyres-Monsell. |
| Health: | Sir E. Hilton Young. |
| Agriculture: | Sir John Gilmour. |
| Labour: | Sir Henry Betterton. |
| Works: | W. Ormsby-Gore. |

Lord Irwin succeeded Maclean in July 1932. Snowden, Samuel, Sinclair resigned in September 1932, and were replaced by Baldwin

MacDonald's Second National Government: November 1931-June 1935—continued

(combining the offices of Lord Privy Seal and Lord President), Sir John Gilmour and Sir Godfrey Collins; Walter Elliot succeeded Gilmour at the Ministry of Agriculture. Sir Kingsley-Wood (Postmaster-General) entered the Cabinet in 1932. Oliver Stanley succeeded Betterton at the Ministry of Labour in June 1934.

Baldwin's National Government, June 1935-May 1937

| | |
|---|---|
| Prime Minister: | Stanley Baldwin. |
| Lord President: | J. Ramsay MacDonald. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Hailsham. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | Lord Londonderry. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Neville Chamberlain. |
| Home Office: | Sir John Simon. |
| Foreign Office: | Sir Samuel Hoare. |
| Colonies: | Malcolm MacDonald. |
| Dominions: | J. H. Thomas. |
| War: | Lord Halifax. |
| India: | Lord Zetland. |
| Air: | Sir P. Cuncliffe-Lister (Lord Swinton). |
| Scotland: | Sir Godfrey Collins. |
| Board of Trade: | Walter Runciman. |
| Education: | Oliver Stanley. |
| Admiralty: | Sir B Eyres-Monsell (Lord Monsell). |
| Health: | Sir Kingsley Wood. |
| Agriculture: | Walter Elliot. |
| Labour: | Ernest Brown. |
| Works: | W. Ormsby-Gore. |
| Minister without Portfolio for League of Nations Affairs: | Anthony Eden. |
| Minister without Portfolio: | Lord Eustace Percy. |

In November 1935, Lord Halifax succeeded Lord Londonderry, and J. H. Thomas and Malcolm MacDonald changed places; A. Duff Cooper succeeded Lord Halifax at the War Office. In December 1935, Eden succeeded Hoare at the Foreign Office. In March 1936, Sir Thomas Inskip joined the Cabinet as Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, and Lord Eustace Percy resigned. In May 1936, Thomas resigned from the Colonial Office, and was succeeded by Ormsby-Gore, who in turn was replaced at the Office of Works by Lord Stanhope. In June 1936 Sir Samuel Hoare succeeded Lord Monsell at the Admiralty. In October 1936, Walter Elliot succeeded Collins at the Scottish Office and was succeeded at the Ministry of Agriculture by W. S. Morrison; Leslie Hore-Belisha, Minister of Transport, joined the Cabinet.

Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet, May 1937–September 1939

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Prime Minister: | Neville Chamberlain. |
| Lord President: | Lord Halifax. |
| Lord Chancellor: | Lord Hailsham. |
| Lord Privy Seal: | Lord De La Warr. |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer: | Sir John Simon. |
| Home Office: | Sir Samuel Hoare. |
| Foreign Office: | Anthony Eden. |
| Colonies: | W. Ormsby-Gore. |
| Dominions: | Malcolm MacDonald. |
| War: | Leslie Hore-Belisha |
| India: | Lord Zetland. |
| Air: | Lord Swinton. |
| Scotland: | Walter Elliot. |
| Board of Trade: | Oliver Stanley. |
| Education: | Lord Stanhope. |
| Admiralty: | A. Duff Cooper. |
| Health: | Sir Kingsley Wood. |
| Agriculture: | W. S. Morrison. |
| Labour: | Ernest Brown. |
| Co-ordination of Defence: | Sir Thomas Inskip. |
| Transport: | Leslie Burgin. |

Lord Halifax succeeded Eden at the Foreign Office in February 1938 and was succeeded as Lord President by Lord Hailsham (succeeded in October 1938, by Lord Runciman); Lord Maugham succeeded Hailsham as Lord Chancellor; Lord Winterton, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, entered the Cabinet (March). In May 1938, Malcolm MacDonald succeeded Ormsby-Gore at the Colonial Office, and was succeeded by Lord Stanley at the Dominions Office (in October 1938, MacDonald combined the Colonies and Dominion posts, but in January 1939 parted with the Dominions in favour of Inskip); Sir Kingsley Wood succeeded Lord Swinton at the Air Ministry and was succeeded at the Ministry of Health by Walter Elliot; D. J. Colville succeeded Elliot at the Scottish Office. In October 1938, Lord Stanhope succeeded Duff Cooper at the Admiralty, and Sir John Anderson succeeded Lord De La Warr as Lord Privy Seal; Lord De La Warr succeeded Lord Stanhope at the Board of Education. In January 1939, W. S. Morrison succeeded Lord Winterton as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and was succeeded at the Ministry of Agriculture by Sir R. H. Dorman-Smith; Admiral Lord Chatfield replaced Inskip as Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Euan Wallace succeeded Burgin as Minister of Transport in April 1939; Burgin became Minister without Portfolio (Minister of Supply in July).

APPENDIX IV

Chiefs of Staff Appointments 1918–39

First Sea Lords

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1918 (Jan 10) to 1919 (Oct 31) | Acting-Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss. |
| 1919 (Nov 1) „ 1927 (Jul 9) | Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty. |
| 1927 (Jul 10) „ 1930 (Jul 29) | Admiral of the Fleet Sir Charles Madden. |
| 1930 (Jul 30) „ 1933 (Jan 20) | Admiral Sir Frederick Field. |
| 1933 (Jan 21) „ 1938 (Nov 16) | Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield (Lord Chatfield, 1937). |
| 1938 (Nov 17) „ 1939 (Jun 14) | Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse. |
| 1939 (Jun 15) „ 1943 (Oct 15) | Admiral Sir Dudley Pound. |

Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1918 (Feb 19) to 1922 (Feb 18) | Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson. |
| 1922 (Feb 19) „ 1926 (Feb 18) | General the Earl of Cavan. |
| 1926 (Feb 19) „ 1933 (Feb 18) | Field Marshal Sir George Milne (later Lord Milne). |
| 1933 (Feb 19) „ 1936 (Apr 6) | Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd. |
| 1936 (Apr 7) „ 1937 (Dec 5) | Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell. |
| 1937 (Dec 6) „ 1939 (Sep 4) | Lieutenant-General Viscount Gort. |
| 1939 (Sep 5) „ 1940 (Jan 10) | General Sir Edmund Ironside. |

Chiefs of the Air Staff

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1918 (Jan 18) to 1918 (Apr 14) | Major-General Sir Hugh Trenchard. |
| 1918 (Apr 15) „ 1919 (Mar 31) | Major-General Sir Frederick Sykes. |
| 1919 (Apr 1) „ 1929 (Dec 31) | Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir Hugh Trenchard. |
| 1930 (Jan 1) „ 1933 (Mar 31) | Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir John Salmond. |
| 1933 (Apr 1) „ 1933 (Apr 27) | Air Chief Marshall Sir William Salmond. |
| 1933 (Apr 28) „ 1933 (May 21) | Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir John Salmond (temporary only). |
| 1933 (May 22) „ 1937 (Aug 31) | Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir Edward Ellington. |
| 1937 (Sep 1) „ 1940 (Oct 25) | Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall. |

APPENDIX V

Chronological Chart of the Principal Events, 1921-39

| <i>Year</i> | <i>General</i> | <i>Britain and Commonwealth</i> | <i>France</i> | <i>Germany</i> | <i>Italy</i> |
|-------------|--|--|---|--|--------------|
| 1921 | <i>November</i> Washington Naval Disarmament Conference <i>December</i> Four Power Treaty (U.S.A.—Britain—France—Japan) | <i>June</i> Imperial Conference | <i>February</i> Franco-Polish Treaty | | |
| 1922 | <i>February</i> Washington Nine Power Treaty ref. China | | <i>January</i> Anglo-French Pact (Reparations) | | |
| 1923 | | <i>October–November</i> Imperial Conference | <i>January</i> French occupy the Ruhr | <i>November</i> Hitler—Ludendorff Putsch | |
| 1924 | | | | <i>April</i> Hindenburg President of the Republic | |
| 1925 | <i>October</i> Locarno Agreements signed | United Kingdom returns to the Gold Standard | | | |
| 1926 | <i>September</i> Germany admitted to League | | | <i>April</i> German—Soviet Non-Aggression Pact | |
| 1927 | <i>May</i> World Economic Conference (Geneva) <i>September</i> Geneva Naval Disarmament Conference | | | | |
| 1928 | <i>August</i> Kellog—Briand Pact | | | | |
| 1929 | <i>May</i> Little Entente Treaty (Yugoslavia—Roumania—Czechoslovakia) <i>October</i> Collapse of New York Stock Exchange | | | <i>August</i> Reparations Conference —The Hague <i>October</i> Stresemann died | |
| 1930 | | <i>April</i> London Naval Treaty | | <i>January</i> Reparations Conference: The Hague <i>May</i> Young Plan comes into force | |
| | | <i>September</i> Imperial Conference | | | |
| 1931 | <i>May</i> Collapse of the Austrian Creditanstalt <i>September</i> Japan invades Manchuria | <i>September</i> Britain leaves the Gold Standard | | | |
| 1932 | <i>January</i> The Shanghai Incident <i>February</i> Geneva Disarmament Conference; Japan declares Manchukuo independent <i>March</i> League does not recognise Manchukuo <i>October</i> Bucharest: 3rd Balkan Conference | <i>July–August</i> Ottawa Economic Conference | | <i>June–July</i> Lausanne—Reparations and War Debts Conference | |

| | | | | |
|------|---|---|---|--|
| 1933 | <p><i>February</i> Japan announces withdrawal from the League. Disarmament Conference resumes work</p> <p><i>March</i> MacDonald Plan accepted by General Commission of League. Japan withdraws from League</p> <p><i>November</i> Balkan Pact—Salonica</p> | <p><i>November</i> D.R.S.C. meets to examine Britain's preparedness for war</p> | <p><i>January</i> Hitler seizes power</p> <p><i>February</i> The Reichstag Fire</p> <p><i>March</i> Hitler opens Reichstag in the Potsdam Garrison Chapel</p> <p><i>October</i> Germany withdraws from League</p> | |
| 1934 | <p><i>March</i> British Air Estimates</p> <p><i>May</i> Disarmament Conference; East European Pact announced</p> <p><i>October</i> Murder of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and M. Louis Barthou</p> <p><i>December</i> Japan denounces the Washington Treaty</p> | <p><i>March</i> French official reply to British Plan for altering ratio between French and German arms</p> <p><i>July</i> British Rearmament Programme</p> | <p><i>June</i> Röhm Purge. Schleicher and his wife murdered</p> <p><i>July</i> Murder of Dollfuss. Schuschnigg Austrian Chancellor.</p> <p><i>August</i> Death of Hindenburg. Hitler German Chancellor.</p> | <p><i>December</i> Abyssinian War started</p> |
| 1935 | | | <p><i>January</i> Franco-Italian Agreement signed at Rome</p> <p><i>February</i> Anglo-French talks (Proposals for making Locarno Treaties effective)</p> <p><i>May</i> Franco-Soviet Pact (Paris)</p> | <p><i>March</i> Existence of Luftwaffe admitted. Hitler reintroduces Conscription</p> <p><i>April</i> Stresa Conference. Italy France, Great Britain agree to maintain Austrian independence</p> |
| | <p><i>August</i> Three-Power Conference of Italo-Abyssinian dispute</p> <p><i>October</i> Agreement to impose Sanctions on Italy (League)</p> | <p><i>June</i> London-Naval Conference; Anglo-German Naval Treaty</p> | | <p><i>October</i> Italy makes full scale war on Abyssinia</p> |
| 1936 | <p><i>March</i> Abyssinia agrees to negotiate to end war</p> <p><i>July</i> Outbreak of Spanish Civil War</p> <p><i>October</i> King Leopold of Belgium announces new foreign policy</p> | <p><i>March</i> London Meeting of Locarno powers except Germany. London Naval Treaty signed</p> | <p><i>February</i> Soviet Pact ratified</p> <p><i>August</i> Franco-British declaration of non-intervention in Spain</p> | <p><i>March</i> Germany occupies Rhineland</p> <p><i>October</i> Ciano and von Neurath sign secret protocol for joint intervention in Spain</p> <p><i>November</i> Mussolini announces Italo-German Entente (Rome-Berlin axis) and Anti-Comintern Pact</p> |

CHRONOLOGICAL CHART OF THE PRINCIPAL EVENTS, 1921-39—continued

| Year | General | Britain and Commonwealth | France | Germany | Italy |
|------|--|---|--------|---|---|
| 1937 | <i>September</i> Agreement signed at Nyon on suppression of submarine piracy in Spanish war | <i>May-June</i> Imperial Conference <i>November</i> Washington Powers Conference | | | <i>January</i> 'Gentleman's Agreement' on Mediterranean—Italy and H.M.G. |
| 1938 | <i>September</i> Munich Agreement ref. Czechoslovakia | | | <i>March</i> Germany annexes Austria <i>May</i> Hitler's visit to Rome | <i>April</i> Italo-British Agreement |
| 1939 | <i>April</i> M Litvinov's proposals to the Western Powers | <i>March</i> Britain announces her guarantees to Poland <i>April</i> Britain announces guarantees to Greece and Roumania. Conscription for Britain <i>June</i> Anglo-French Conference at Singapore <i>August</i> Anglo-Polish Alliance | | <i>March</i> Germany marches into Prague <i>June</i> Germany repudiates Anglo-German Naval Agreement <i>August</i> German-Soviet Pact <i>September</i> Germans invade Poland | <i>April</i> Italy invades Albania |

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